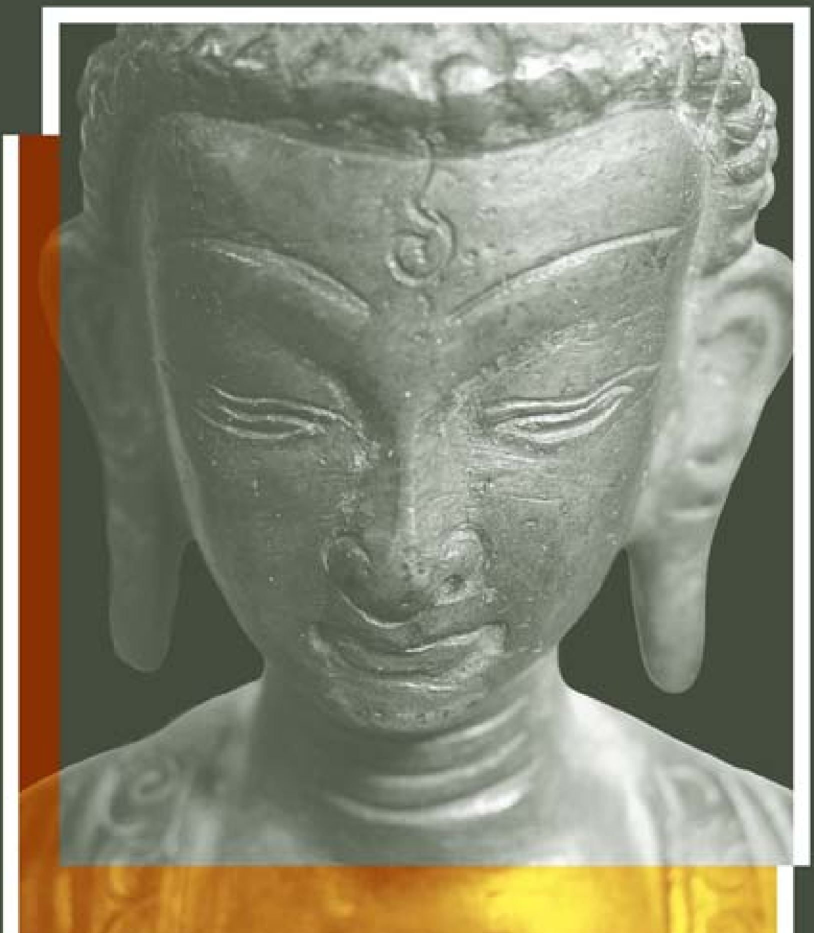
Alan Cole



TEXT AS FATHER

PATERNAL SEDUCTIONS IN
EARLY MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Text as Father

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Alan Cole

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This book is dedicated to
Elvis Costello, whom I've never met but who has inspired me,
since my high school days, with his uncommon sense
of language and the human condition;
and the many students who in my first ten years of teaching—
a time of doubt and uncertainty, for sure—convinced me
that careful thinking about religion was worth the trouble.

I write not as I speak, I speak not as I think, I think not as I ought to think, and so it goes on into the deepest darkness.

FRANZ KAFKA,
LETTER TO HIS SISTER OTTLA, JULY 10, 1914
I Am a Memory Come Alive

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before thanking those who helped me to write this book, I would like to imagine who might/could/should be interested in reading it. Three groups of readers come to mind. First are my colleagues in Buddhist studies who know these texts and, I hope, will find my readings of interest and perhaps of value in their own reflections. Similarly, I hope that those of us who regularly teach the texts discussed here will find cogent descriptions of their narrative dynamics and a set of theoretical issues that could enliven a lecture or discussion. Second, and on a wider plane, I would like to believe that this book will attract readers who are interested in religious narratives. That is, I have tried to keep my discussions broad enough that those history of religions types who read beyond their particular traditions will find enough here to chew on. In particular, as a couple of stray footnotes suggest, throughout this project I have considered the possibility of applying these arguments about truth and paternity in a Christian-Buddhist comparison, a task that I think would be quite rewarding. Third, I have written for the non-specialist public, or rather all those whose interests in truth, narrative, and identity are strong enough to get them through this book. Be they college students or the guy or girl next door, I would like to think that this book offers them relevant reflections on some generic aspects of being human and inhabiting our thoroughly narratized world of language.

With that said, let me thank a number of people who made this book possible. First, I thank my father, an English professor, who taught me much about language and literature and, among other things, spent a lot of time reading to me until I was a young teen. More recently, Stephen (Buzzy) Teiser encouraged me to write this book in December 1998 when, during a short workshop at Princeton University, I presented nascent and somewhat incoherent reflections on the *Platform Sūtra,* reflections that did not make it

into this book and might not make it into the next either. Nonetheless, this workshop gave me the opportunity to go public with a number of ideas regarding the reading of Buddhist literature in an atmosphere that was both challenging and appreciative. Likewise, I deeply appreciate the steady support and encouragement of Angela Zito, who has given me much to think about over the years. Also, I owe much to the students in a seminar that I gave for the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilization at Harvard University in fall 1998. In particular, Cai Yun, Wiebke Denecke, Bong Seok Joo, and Doug Skonicki pushed my thinking on a variety of issues as we debated strategies in the close reading of Buddhist sūtras. And, though I hardly ever get to see him, I also owe warm thanks to Bernard Faure for his various encouragements.

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And, finally, I am almost 100% happy to thank my archcritic, Brook Ziporyn, for his invasive, tantalizing, and occasionally devastating "reviews" of my writing and thinking. Though I do not aspire to the Nietzschean claim that "whatever doesn't kill me . . . ," still, I suspect that I have won much from losing every argument. In particular, extended discussions held in Taipei coffee shops in summer 2002 were enlightening in the final months of editing the manuscript. Though, as usual, I was resistant to all things purely philosophic, that is, cut away from narrative matrixes, a number of issues regarding paternity and truth became clearer to me in the cool smoky interiors of Seattle's Best Coffee on East Nanjing Road. To quote Eeyore, and in the kindest sense of the phrase, "Thanks for noticing."

One final thing here at the beginning: I have left some humorous elements in the book, especially in the section titles, because they still appear to me as invitations to think more freely about the tough issues surrounding truth and legitimacy. Given my occasional playfulness, some readers might wrongly assume that I am disdaining these texts or treating them high-handedly. Not so. Rather, I have kept the lightheartedness in the belief that it will never be proven that serious, that is, unfunny, books are more effective at conveying their meanings than humorous ones.

Introduction

In the curious space of arguments before the arguments, let me introduce this book by acknowledging that some readers might at first find it strange: What could "text as father" mean, and what do fathers have to do with Buddhism in the first place? The suitability of this topic will become clearer in the course of these chapters, but let me promise here at the outset that sifting through early Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras leaves little doubt about how important textually produced paternal figures were for organizing authority and legitimacy, in at least a portion of these texts. What is crucial in organizing my reading is that I take these Mahāyāna sūtras to be knowingly fabricated by wily authors intent on creating images of authority that come to fruition in the reading experience. That is, I do not read the voices of authority—the Buddha's and others'—that fill out these texts as reflections of prior oral articulations or similarly innocent statements about truth and reality. Instead, I see them as carefully wrought literary constructions that assume their specific forms precisely because they were designed to inhabit and function in the literary space where one encounters them. Hence the title *Text as Father* was chosen to represent the dialectic in which texts created and presented images of "truth-fathers" who, among other things, speak to the legitimacy of the textual medium that contains them and, within this circle of self-confirmation, draw the reader into complex realignments with the Buddhist tradition and prior representation of truth and authority.

To explore the form and content of these textual truth-fathers, and the narratives that support them, I have selected four interesting and diverse Mahāyāna texts: the *Lotus Sūtra,* the *Diamond Sūtra,* the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (a work that isn't technically a sūtra but nonetheless comes to refer to itself that way by its final chapters). In close

readings of each of these texts, I show how their narratives first gather up authority, legitimacy, and sanctity, as they would have been previously constituted in the Buddhist tradition and then relocate those items within their own textual perimeters. Hence, in all four texts, the narrative offers a new figure of the Buddha who, once established in the flow of the narrative, explains to the reader that the sum of tradition is exclusively available in the reading experience and in the sheer physical presence of the book. In a brilliant maneuver that fully exploits the physicality of textuality, the narratives pretend to represent the living and supposedly oral aspect of the Buddha, while that "orality" explains that the sheer physicality of the text—on palm leaves, presumably—represents the presence of the Buddha. Thus, by creating plots that delicately balance the Buddha's presence on either side of the textualized form of the narrative—in its genesis and in its reception—these sūtras were designed to serve as the singular vehicle for Buddhist authenticity, promising to actualize truth and legitimacy for any reader, in any time or place.

More exactly, in condensing and displacing the totality of tradition in this manner, each of these sūtras offers a quid pro quo exchange in which it is said that if the reader accepts the encapsulation of tradition within the text as a legitimate fait accompli, then the reader can expect to receive from the text the totality of tradition. Thus the reader's gift of legitimacy *to* the text results in the reader acquiring direct access to just that legitimacy *from* the text. Exaggerating only slightly, each text promises that one becomes a legitimate Buddhist by reading and believing narratives that explain, first, how the "real" Buddhist tradition is not in the monasteries, or in the recognized body of rituals, codes, and practices that shaped Buddhism since its inception, and, second, that tradition is fully installed in the text that is accomplishing this rhetorical overcoming of tradition.

Consequently, salvation in these four texts is no longer defined as the straightforward Buddhist task of overcoming desire and ignorance by seeing the true nature of reality. Instead, salvation is predicated on the reader's devotion to these new textual narratives that, among other things, completely redefine tradition. Putting aside the standard assumptions about Mahāyāna Buddhism—its supposed emphasis on emptiness and compassion—I think a careful and balanced reading of these texts leaves little doubt that salvation, more often than not, was defined not as the function of a view on reality but as a view back on tradition. That is, one's salvation is said to be won through a change in allegiances—from traditional Buddhism to textualized Mahāyāna Buddhism—and not as the effect of a straightforward grappling with existence. In a fully circuitous manner, then, these texts promise that one becomes a buddha by reading and assenting to particular theories about how one becomes a buddha.

Of course, this is not to say that these texts represent anything but a slice

of the truly expansive body of writing and thinking that made up heterogeneous Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, even with this small sampling, I think we can uncover a number of thematics that invite a very different style of reflection on the origin and function of Mahāyāna rhetoric. Similarly, in seeing how their composition as literary works makes a number of demands on their form and content, we gain perspective for rethinking the doctrinal elements of these texts that, until now, have been read without reference to the "politics of textuality" that I am trying to resituate in our interpretations. In short, for some time we have been quite aware of the politics of textuality during this early phase of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but we have not used that problematic as a point of entry for reading these narratives.

On a basic level, then, this book is an effort to understand the antagonistic interface between Mahāyāna textuality and the wider Buddhist tradition. And, naturally, this book ought to be located within the recent trend in scholarship that has, in the past two decades, reconsidered the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and veered away from the sugar-coated textbook explanations that are still often relied on, even in scholarly discussions. Whereas other researchers have been interested in using epigraphy, art, architecture, and travel memoirs to rewrite what now appear as unlikely and untenable histories of early Mahāyāna Buddhism, I have chosen literary analysis, with a focus on narrative dynamics and the various strategies employed for luring the reader away from traditional Buddhist ideas and practices. And, similarly, whereas other scholars have been interested in writing social histories, I have opted for something closer to a literary history, which nonetheless has many implications for writing social or cultural history.

One of the many good reasons for rereading these texts is that heretofore they have been approached with kid gloves and rather clumsily used as evidence for a cheery account of early Mahāyāna Buddhism that is not supported by other kinds of evidence, or even by the texts themselves, once they are read with the gloves off. In short, it is becoming increasingly clear that we do not really have a good idea about the nature of early Mahāyāna Buddhism. Was it, as Gregory Schopen suggests, a peripheral, underprivileged, renegade movement with tendencies toward resentment and hysteria?[1] Or was it something more like a virtual community of readers having limited contact with one another and little or no institutional presence? Or, again, was it a diverse grab bag of new styles of thinking and practicing that defies any singular description? However we end up sketching these scenarios, there is every reason to start work with a return to these texts to ask more carefully what they are about and what they might tell us about the concerns

1. For an introduction to one of the ways that Gregory Schopen has asked us to rethink the history of the Mahāyāna, see his "The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-Glass," *Eastern Buddhist* 32, no. 2 (2000): 1–26.

of these early writers and, better, what their authors imagined were the concerns of their imagined readers. To that end, I have chosen these four texts, which, though a sliver of early Mahāyāna textuality, can be read to show sides of Mahāyāna Buddhism that have gone unnoticed. In particular, my hope is that by concentrating on a few Mahāyāna works, we will gain a useful platform for addressing the narrative complexity of these texts and their deep involvement in the project of seductively rewriting authority so that they can be seen as having the authority to rewrite authority.

A PROBLEM WITH AUTHORITY

A variety of themes will come and go in my close readings, but three are central throughout. First, I have organized my analyses around the dialectical procedures that these texts use for erecting new images of authority, procedures that invariably involve recycling earlier, more established forms of Buddhist authority. Unavoidably, then, there is throughout these texts a play of levels: prior forms of authority and value are relied on and built on, even as they are fully supplanted. Second, I have paid particular attention to the authors' calculated production of desire in the reader for these new forms of authority. Apparently, the various authors of these Mahāyāna texts recognized that authority is authority only when it is recognized as such, a dynamic further heightened when authority is constructed in the space between text and reader, a place where there are no other securing frames, sites of appeal, or modes of punishment. Keeping in mind the complexity and delicateness of this kind of text-reader relationship sheds light on the seductive techniques that these texts embody as they seek to enlist the reader in just this project of redefining the text's singular authority vis-à-vis tradition.

Given the reader's involvement in this effort to redefine authority, it is not surprising that these narratives also spend considerable time redefining the nature of the viewer of that authority. Actually, in one way or another, all four texts offer a full conversion experience in which the reader formally "kills" his or her relationship to older forms of Buddhist authority in order to be initiated into this new textual form of Buddhism. Thus these texts reveal a tight interweaving of authority and desire such that they only effect the transfiguration of authority by exciting in the reader the possibility of gaining direct access to Buddhist truth and value through previously unknown and unsanctioned conduits of power, conduits that the texts create, monopolize, and purvey.

With these basic polemical and contractual issues at least partially in view, the third theme—the role of fathers in the rhetoric of these Mahāyāna sūtras—makes more sense. Though it would not be sensible to argue that the paternal trope was *the* dominant idiom in early Mahāyāna literature, it is still undeniable that the cycle of initiating Buddhists into "textual Bud-

dhism" was at times, and in important works, constructed as a process for recovering a lost truth-father. By casting the conversion sequence as the rightful reconstitution of a religious father-son connection, the texts won for themselves a host of interesting logics that increase the aura of legitimacy around the claims to authority, even as they increase the reader's desire for the narrative. Thus the paternal motif is not simply a kind of lazy metaphor set in place to facilitate a shift in authority. Instead, it appears as part of an aggressive rhetoric intent on explaining to the reader how and why he or she is *already* rightfully "owned" by the father-in-the-text. Though this kind of rhetoric seems rather pushy, it is also clear that such claims to "own the reader" were expected to be attractive precisely for their ability to explain the reader's origin and destiny and to position the reader to be ready to receive legitimacy in surprisingly direct exchanges with the narrative itself.

In fact, these authors seemed to have recognized a range of advantages in designing their narrative seductions around the father-son trope. For example, it maps well on to the basic divide between text and reader: the text, in the role of the progenitor, claims to have the timeless overview onto the origins of truth, value, and being; the reader, on the other hand, is cast as the son unaware of his origin and his "preestablished" relationship to these larger realities, even as he is positioned as one desperately in need of rejoining his legitimate "ground of being." Too, with the text as father, the reader is offered an already purified, fixed, yet disembodied voice of legitimacy that hangs forever in the suspended time of the narrative but nonetheless arrogates the right to promise purity, identity, and inclusion to the reader, and does so all the more convincingly because its own relationship to the Real of history and productivity is altogether purified, rewritten, and contained within itself.

In considering this parallel between fathers and sons, and texts and readers, we ought to recognize that all claims to paternity involve a claim to both know and own an abiding reality behind the given. That is, in patriarchal situations when a man claims a child as his own and gives it his surname, he has to discount the obvious origins of the child in the mother and then deny the activity of any other productive force. Thus in claiming a kind of sameness with the child, the father is asserting confidence in an enduring continuity undergirding the sequence, a continuity that though claimed in narrative form—I conceived this child some time ago—also promises a kind of extranarrative reality: this child's real being is related to my being, and that shared sameness goes beyond the narrative that explains why this should be so.

This issue regarding the way paternal rhetoric turns into paternal "being" foreshadows another important theme in this book. In brief, I regularly point out how rhetoric tries to actualize itself by getting the readers of these new forms of Buddhist sonship to shift their gaze from the text, and the read-

ing moment, into the misty past where these magical paternal elements supposedly are lodged. Captivated by the possibility of regaining that lost link to total truth, the reader neglects the oddness of the entire literary structure that produced the gaze, the claim of paternity, and the textual structures that will harvest just this longing for a familial connection to the Buddha. In effect, then, Mahāyāna authors, who were writing at least three hundred or four hundred years after the death of the historical Buddha, devised convincing rhetorics for making their new rhetorics look infinitely old, even as they offered readers the chance to regain "what was always theirs."

Part of making the new look old is the immaculate production of the textual father in the narrative. To focus on this issue, we first have to remember that in these skirmishes over the site and "voice" of real paternity, legitimate Buddhist identity is supposedly won or lost through correctly identifying with new versions of the "oldest," and therefore most reliable, father of tradition. For the reader, these identifications are fully won not just by accepting the new version of the truth-father but also by performing the complex gesture of embracing *and* ignoring the narrative in which he appears. Thus the narrative only succeeds when the reader is led to install a "speaking truth-father" within the literary framing of the text, even as the reader ignores how the narrative constructed and purveyed the image of such a "live" truth-father who then, ironically, commands the reader to cherish this very textualized narrative as the solution to all Buddhist problems of legitimacy. Naturally, for this circle of reciprocity between text and textual father to work, paternity, as an inescapably narrative claim, only functions when the Real of the paternal narrative—that past mystical event that explains identity and legitimacy in the present—appears to exist independently of the narrative. These paternal narratives work, then, only when their literary nature disappears into the Real (father) they have constructed, so that this constructed Real (father) can be the basis of their own literary construction and the basis of a textually based form of legitimacy.

Put in semiotic terms, the signified father must at all expenses appear to escape his origins in the matrix of signifiers in order that he may go about his business of installing signifiers and signifieds and explaining the legitimizing effects that those signifiers have on those who consume them. Thus paternity, though produced in the text, is designed to appear to lie on either side of the text—in the (pretextual) speaking truth-father and his intended filial reader. If the narrative succeeds in convincing the reader that both it (the narrative) and the son came from the father-beyond-the-narrative, then the narrative will be on firm ground for mediating this gap between that father and the reading-son by offering the following bargain: admit unreservedly that the "voice" of this narrative explaining paternity and these new forms of authority and identity came from said father, and you will have committed the single most important Buddhist act, an act that will

result in you regaining a legitimate relationship with said father and full legitimacy as a Buddhist. Thus lurking here is a form of that fundamental configuration found throughout the world's religions: admit that the theory of immaculate identity is itself immaculately conceived, that is, not a theory, not language about language, and so on, but simply the truth, and you will have your own form of immaculate identity.

Clearly, when we read these texts as literary creations intensely preoccupied with their legitimacy and their reception, these bargains, and the framings that support them, suddenly seem more sensible and we cannot but reflect more carefully on the play of form and content. Moreover, we gain a rich sense for how supposedly fixed and independent items such as identity, tradition, and truth-patriarchy are created along the organized tracks of narrative development that exist in that fecund space between the production and the reception of language.

COMPLICATIONS

Though setting out to reconsider the gentle, sexless, and even democratic images of Mahāyāna Buddhism that we produced and heartily consumed in the twentieth century probably sounds interesting enough, I need to admit that this book is, in places, challenging to read. This is, I would like to believe, a result of the subject matter at hand. It is never easy or straightforward to make sense of the way patriarchal systems assert ineffable connections between things that are otherwise perceived as separate and distinct. What, after all, holds father and son together, whether in the reproductive family or in the more rarified zone of Buddhist community? If it is some sameness that is posited between them, how is this sameness known? And, equally important, how is the chaos of time, women, and Otherness suppressed and removed in this claim to paternal sameness and continuity? Then it turns out that defending this sameness-over-time has the additional task of needing to appear natural and unconstructed, that is, simply true and uncontrived, for it to be convincing. Thus, in fact, part of the constructedness of patriarchal sameness-over-time has to hide the constructedness.

Even for those with a background in thinking about related matters, working through the rhetorical architecture that presents these wished-for connections between father and son, as well as the logics that support and naturalize them, can make for demanding reading. Also, for better or worse, to deal with the complexities of patriarchal logic, I have relied on some less than wonderful neologisms, often hooked together with hyphens. Some readers may find terms such as "truth-father" and "sameness-over-time" unnerving at first, but I decided that the ideas behind these neologisms were significant enough to warrant their own titles. As always, the proof will be in the proverbial pudding.

Given the density of interpretations offered here, one might also ask, why must the discussion of Buddhism, or religion in general, be so complicated? Or again, why must we deal with the issues surrounding fathers and sons, immaculate conception through narrative, and the ever present problem of desire-in-literature? This reaction, provided it is not just resistance to critical inquiry, seems useful since it opens up the possibility of placing Buddhist literature on a timeline, situating it within a history of various forms of symbolic communication.[2] For instance, when Mahāyāna sūtra writers began, roughly a century or so before the common era, writing multilayered narratives about truth and paternity, Buddhist thought moved into new zones of creativity, full of intriguing notions of intersubjectivity and seduction. When read in this more literary manner, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the authors of these texts were supposing to know enough about you, the reader, to design a reading experience that would shift your whole notion of truth and identity. In short, these narratives are revolutionary not just for their shift in medium from orality to literature, but also for their attempt to completely reconstruct significant aspects of identity and authority in the Buddhist tradition. And, in fact, there are good reasons for thinking these two aspects are linked in significant ways: a new medium for identity and authority both required and encouraged new forms of identity and authority. Clearly, narratives of this caliber complicate religion and, consequently, explanations of religion.

With regard to complexity in analysis, it seems equally fair to ask, why bring to the reading of Buddhist literature perspectives that owe much to Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Wayne Booth, Peter Brooks, Mary Douglas, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Slajov Žižek, and others? To address this question, we first ought to let go of the illusion that we have a choice between theory and no-theory. Most readers probably would agree that any attempt to construct meaning in a text unavoidably requires a particular hermeneutical position. As other scholars have noted, the traditional twentieth-century reading of Buddhist literature in a supposedly nontheoretical mode is a complicated hermeneutical venture prejudiced toward a rather circumscribed set of interpretive positions. Thus I am in the group of interpreters who believe that there is no such thing as an "open reading," since every extraction of meaning requires that two-step maneuver in which a particular interpreta-

2. This kind of questioning is essentially parallel to Georg Lukács's interest in the emergence of the historical novel; see his *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962). I am not interested in pushing the Marxist agenda that Lukács had in front of him, but his work is relevant to my inquiry and stimulating in its own right. In particular, one can see in Lukács the idea of "imagined community" (see pp. 23 ff.), if not the phrase, that would be such a useful concept, especially once Benedict Anderson gave it fuller attention; see Anderson's *Imagined Communities,* rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991). Apparently Anderson was unaware of Lukács's views for he does not mention Lukács despite the obvious affinity in their perspectives.

tion is pulled from the matrix of all other possible readings and then set within the lexicon of the reader's own meaning system. Given these suppositions, what I have attempted to do in this book is restart the hermeneutical circle with the emphasis on underappreciated aspects of these sūtras, such as their authority structures, their modes of seducing the reader, and their anxious polemical stance vis-à-vis earlier forms of Buddhism. The result, I hope, is that these previously overlooked elements gain a place in the discussion and that recognition of these elements provides new layers of evidence for thinking about the nature of early Mahāyāna Buddhism and its place in the evolution of the Buddhist tradition.

READING TEXTS AS TEXTS

A key element in restarting the hermeneutical circle is to read these texts for their plots.[3] Buddhist studies, though rather developed philologically, has been less willing to engage Buddhist literature as literature. In fact, there are very few studies of Buddhist narratives, and even fewer studies that seek to understand the evolution of narrative devices through different phases of Buddhist history. Apparently, there is a stable resistance to thinking about these texts as literary constructions, designed for readers who are to move through the narrative and absorb information on several layers of symbolic communication. This lack of enthusiasm for reading narratives as narratives is even more limiting when it becomes clear that many Mahāyāna sūtras are quite aware of themselves as plots lodged in physical texts and thus seem to be functioning at a fairly sophisticated level of symbolic exchange. Consequently, I would argue that reading these texts without considering how the plots work rather skews how we appreciate their content and intent.

To briefly outline what is implied by shifting to this reading strategy, it is useful to imagine a triangle of engagement wherein each of these texts explicitly displays three figures for the reader: (1) an image of the sūtra itself, objectified as a sublime Thing that is exchanged by figures in the narrative as the singular means to produce and reproduce supposedly perfect and final versions of tradition; (2) new forms of Buddhist patriarchy that stand behind the text to validate it, even as the text takes those patriarchal essences into itself and makes them available to those readers who would correctly read and worship the text; and (3) the hoped-for adoring reader who is to receive this text, and its supporting patriarchy, as the center of a newly reconstructed Buddhism that claims to both supersede and predate any other previously known form of Buddhism. It is these three elements

3. I have taken this phrase, "reading for the plot," from the title of Peter Brooks's impressive and engaging book, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

that, besides holding down the corners of the text's "public appearance," regularly receive the lion's share of the texts' interest.

Moreover, the other content in the texts, while not necessarily directly related to these three corners, can often be shown to be shaped by the concerns of these three entities and the roles they are expected to play. Thus, as I argue below, supposedly abstract philosophic or metaphysical arguments about Buddhist issues are often better read as efforts to establish and fortify this triangle instead of simply being about their purported topics. That is, given the structural insecurities of these narratives-in-print, we have to be ready to treat various polemical projects in the narratives as set pieces, or performances, whose inclusion in the narrative is a function of the narrative's structural concerns and not representative of a straightforward desire to communicate views on Buddhist truth. This kind of reading, of course, is simply one that remains sensitive to the dialectics between form and content, dialectics that are particularly tight in the case of texts that seek to eviscerate tradition as it had been known and claim, in its stead, to represent total truth and the paternal legitimacy to claim that truth.

To clarify what is at stake here, I should add that instead of reading for the plot, which can only be understood in a mobile, cumulative, fabricated, and seductive manner, earlier styles of interpretation were more interested in processes of extraction that treated literature as a static entity from which one could, supposedly, recover self-sufficient doctrinal elements. In this manner of reading, interest is focused on particularly interesting passages, statements, or even terms, without giving attention to the supporting and structuring narratives to which they belong. Thus, for instance, one can find the standard claim that the layman Vimalakīrti in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a radical antinomian figure, even though it is clear that when we give due consideration to the bulwarks of authority and continuity that frame his place in the text, his role appears much more conservative and undeniably involved in the restructuring of authority and legitimacy. In fact, by the end of the text, Vimalakīrti as a dangerous and daunting character disappears from the narrative action, and the narrator spends the last three chapters encapsulating Vimalakīrti's performances within the boundaries of the text itself, thereby domesticating his destabilizing comments and preparing the discourse, itself, to be worshiped as the center of a new version of tradition. As a passage near the end of the narrative explains:[4]

4. Burton Watson, trans., *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 135, with important revisions; T.14.555c.22. ("T" in this citation, and all those following, stands for *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō,* which is the modern Japanese edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon that is most regularly cited for scholarly purposes. I cite it by volume number, page number, folio, and line, when this is appropriate. Thus T.54.328a.5 refers to *Taishō,* vol. 54, p. 328, folio "a"—the first of three folios—and the fifth line from the right.)

> One who has received, in hand, this sūtra *(jingdian)* has thereby acquired the storehouse of the jewels of the Law *(fabao zhi cang)*. If one reads and recites it, understands and expounds it, and practices it in accordance with what is explained [in the text], then the buddhas will remember and protect that person. And, those who give alms to such a person should know that they are giving alms to the Buddha. If there are those who copy and preserve these sūtra scrolls *(jingzhuan)*, let it be known that it is as though the Tathāgata is in their rooms. And, whoever hears this sūtra *(jing)* and is able to follow it happily *(neng suixi)*, then this person will obtain all wisdoms. If one is able to believe and understand this sūtra, even as little as one quatrain, and explain it to others, then this person will surely receive the prediction of highest enlightenment.

Once the text is considered in light of these important framing devices that dictate how the narrative seeks to position itself vis-à-vis the Buddha and tradition, the content of Vimalakīrti's radicalism at the "core" of the text appears to be part of a rather sophisticated literary putsch that hollows out tradition, even as accepting the narrative of tradition's "failure" turns into the basis for building faith and devotion in a new form of tradition. Thus what was previously assumed to be the "message" of the text—those central chapters that wickedly belittle and embarrass famous traditional figures—now seems part of a much more sophisticated literary effort intent on insinuating itself at the apex of the Buddhist symbolic system with the right to control direct access to the Buddha and authenticity, as the above passage suggests. This sequence of performed-antinomianism-for-new-order is all the clearer when the narrator then has the Buddha transmit the *Vimalakīrti,* as text, to the future Buddha Maitreya, repeating tradition's oldest recipe for legitimacy and continuity.

What is really radical here, then, is that the narrative includes a narrative about itself and its relationship to the reader in which, having first encapsulated tradition within its borders, the narrative offers itself to the reader, thereby putting the totality of "legitimate" tradition in the reader's hands and inviting him or her to assume kinship with Maitreya, who, according to the narrative, received no more and no less than just this text. Clearly, once we resituate the figure of Vimalakīrti in his multilayered narrative that both reconstitutes Buddhist patriarchy and delivers it immaculately to the reader, Vimalakīrti's antinomian rhetoric appears designed to serve constructive and, in many ways, conservative agendas that are the opposite of what is usually said of him. In fact, just like the old joke that communism is the fastest way to move from capitalism to capitalism, antinomianism and negativity seem to be the surest way to move from order to order, as Arnold van Gennep pointed out nearly a century ago.

This approach leads into the rich vein of figuring out how Mahāyāna Buddhist narratives work around ritual-like reading sequences that regularly begin with a traditional item or practice, vacate it, and then reconstitute it in

a hyper or aggrandized form that subsumes the prior form in a Hegelian kind of dialectic. Hence it would seem that the narrative in the *Vimalakīrti* is an example of a Mahāyāna text creating a new version of tradition by seducing the reader with the idea that real tradition is won by accepting that [old] tradition did not exactly have tradition. Consequently, in this text, and others like it, there is the repeated attempt to rewrite, or perhaps we should say replumb, prior narratives of authority to show that tradition is somewhere else, located in previously unheard of origins, and now available in hitherto unknown outlets—the text that holds that very narrative.

While pointing to this kind antagonism of Mahāyāna writers to earlier forms of tradition may sound familiar, I should emphasize that my reading is more directed toward the paradox that these texts often evince: the Mahāyāna versions of truth and tradition can often appear nearly vapid of free-standing content and instead manifest their claim to own truth and tradition simply by forcefully arguing that truth and tradition are not in the early forms of Buddhism. That is, Mahāyāna content is often produced via negation and overcoming, acts that are expected to be enthralling and satisfying enough for the reader and manageable enough to be folded back into the text's stabilizing structures of authority and continuity. In fact, as we will see, the right-to-negate is taken to be the very heart of authoritative discourse, and thus voiding prior forms of authority is doubly the basis for founding new authority since old authority now no longer holds sway and the "voice" that declared the prior forms lacking has, de facto, declared its own authority to define authority, which is arguably the essence of authority.

In sum, to make sense of these various efforts to rewrite legitimacy and tradition, it is absolutely necessary to read the segments of these narratives in the context of their whole narrative matrixes. Moreover, it is essential to respect the framing of the outcome, a framing that will inevitably be conservative and intent on establishing new structures of closure and hierarchy. Hence thematics such as "staged negativity" or "performed demolition of prior forms of authority and tradition" become crucial pieces of the puzzle for figuring out how these texts work as reading experiences. That is to say, the humiliation and overcoming of traditional forms of tradition served as both the doorway and the living room for inhabiting the house of early Mahāyāna Buddhism. Of course, once read in this manner, we will be on solid ground as we turn, in the sequel to this book, to consider how Chan literature works.

LIMITS

Though I am convinced that the approach outlined above is useful for interpreting these texts, I have to admit that I am far from having exhausted interpretive strategies for the dialectic processes in the narratives. Likewise,

I expect that the next several decades will show even more shifts in our ideas about early Mahāyāna Buddhism, shifts that likely will require repositioning my analyses of these rhetorical strategies to accord with new findings. This is unavoidable, of course, but I would like to point out, too, that even in the present, several basic questions remain at large in my theorizing about the symbolic effects that these narratives generate as they move readers through sequences of destruction and reconstruction. For instance, in terms of history, is this dialectical reframing of the tradition *simply* the effect of shifting rhetoric from orally transmitted forms to newly discovered literary spaces, or might there be other forces at work here? That is, might these polemics aimed at overcoming tradition be evidence of basic dynamics that appear in the historical evolution of any tradition as it moves forward in time to re-create and reconsolidate itself? Similarly, might these dialectical patterns have evolved partially under the influence of other patterns in the wider Indian context, in particular sacrifice and cosmogony, both of which seem to be arranged in parallel formats?

And, on a phenomenological level, what are we to make of narratives that have punch lines and endgames and yet ask to be repeated over and over, even as the reader surely knows the outcome? Certainly children consume narratives in this manner—demanding that all the details of the story be played out exactly over and over, even when the ending is well known—but might this command to repetition be indicative of something else? In particular, since all the texts considered here work at generating an identity in the reader that is built on the ruins of a prior identity, might we not postulate a boundless desire to repeat a story that regenerates identity and authority for itself and for the reader? And, finally, even without imposing a sacrificial structure on the reading experience, isn't the command to repeat these narratives attractive because these narratives relate, *and effect,* the emergence of a full symbolic world, with a place of glory reserved for the reader who participates unreservedly in the process? To read and reread these texts, then, is to re-create oneself and the world over and over. What could be more intoxicating?

Answers to these questions will not come easily, and I do not want to give the reader the impression that I have firm and fixed solutions to these conundrums. On the other hand, I feel confident that for each of these texts I offer analyses that trace out several layers of meaning and intent, which, if far from being the final word on certain issues, will encourage a wider and more thoughtful range of readings in the future.

ORAL TEXTUALITY/TEXTUAL ORALITY

Among the tenuous aspects of this argument there is one more point to mention—a not so quiet elephant in the corner that will no doubt elicit

some controversy. Obviously, I have chosen to assume that these texts were written as texts. I made this assumption based on several types of evidence that likely will hold up, but the problem has several angles that are not easy to resolve. Let me first sketch the types of evidence that influenced my decision, points that are developed in the chapters that follow, and then offer some initial reflections on how, even if we assume that literary formats govern the composition of these works, there still likely was a porous border between literary and oral forms as these narratives developed in time.

I count seven types of evidence of literary composition. First, the narratives at times speak of themselves as texts that could and should be copied and transmitted to others. The word *book* is often used, the act of writing is regularly mentioned, reading is often discussed, and so on; consequently, there is no doubt that a range of Mahāyāna sūtras were composed not only in an awareness of writing, but also chose to rely on the new medium for a variety of narrative agendas. Of course, one could argue that these passages were added later, after a narrative shifted from an oral format to a literary one, that is, that these specific lines and the entire cult of the text that figures so prominently in many Mahāyāna works were an afterthought unrelated to the composition of the rest of the narrative.

However, besides being unprovable at this point, this post facto explanation of the overt presence of discourse on textuality in Mahāyāna sūtras seems to run up against the second form of evidence: in many cases the Mahāyāna sūtras represent a very different style of presenting the voice of the Buddha, a style that seems quite at odds with early non-Mahāyānic models and suggests that the shift from orality to textuality was not simply effected by writing down oral discourse and then lightly embellishing it by tacking on simple statements about the value of rewriting the literary version of the previously oral teaching or worshiping it as a sublime Thing. Thus explaining away the explicit references to textual forms of the narratives in the narratives will not be very convincing, because Mahāyāna sūtras often work on a level of narrative sophistication that is largely absent in non-Mahāyānic writing. Hence if we do not posit something monumental—such as the shift from oral tradition to literary composition—we will still have the looming problem of why Mahāyāna narratives often seem so different.

Moreover, these shifts in narrative scale and technical ability also include the third type of evidence: self-reflexive narratives, in which the narrative is often about itself. Non-Mahāyānic texts rarely take themselves as objects of discourse; they simply are the word of the Buddha gathered up into a particular teaching with a title attached. Mahāyāna sūtras, on the other hand, often present the Buddha speaking and discussing the text itself in ways to promote and legitimize it. The shift is telling insofar as the Mahāyāna sūtras are self-aware in ways that earlier Buddhist discourse is not, a fact that could be opened up to argue that a narrative's ability to objectify itself in this man-

ner is also likely the effect of literature since the flow of language now is fully visible as object beyond its simple virtual presence in oral recitation. In short, once language was visible in orthography and book form, it was a whole lot easier to write narratives in which the narrative, as object, figures in that flow of narrative events.

The presence of explicit themes of self-reflexivity leads to the fourth type of evidence: many of the Mahāyāna sūtras evince a deep-seated insecurity that is absent in pre-Mahāyānic works. Thus one regularly finds a variety of passages dedicated to threatening what happens to those who do not accept the text, just as the texts regularly spend large portions of their dialogues advertising the merit and value to be won from simply accepting the text as valid. In effect, Mahāyāna sūtras regularly seem insecure about their rights to be "speaking" in the first place and consequently build for themselves complex economies of threats and promises in which Buddhist practice and authenticity is condensed around the recipient's relationship to the discourse. This kind of pressure to engage the discourse as the litmus test for being authentically Buddhist is largely, if not wholly, absent in what we understand to be the early forms of representing the Buddha's teaching and marks an implicit awareness that these forms of discourse were fabricated under the expectation of no small amount of resistance from other wings of the Buddhist community. In sum, Mahāyāna sūtras seem acutely aware of their place in that triangle I sketched above wherein tradition, the text, and the reader are clearly held in view with specific mechanisms employed for getting the reader to see the text and tradition in particular ways that overhaul the former structures of Buddhist authority. These complex forms of reader seduction and narrative self-justification are strong points of evidence for a budding literary culture that was quite aware of the liberties it was taking and sought to hide its ingenuity and fabrication in order to find a defendable place on the field of Buddhist discourse.

For the fifth type of narrative evidence for assuming literary composition, one could point to the way that many Mahāyāna sūtras deal in omniscient narrators that are fundamentally impossible. In many sūtras, the story is told from a point of view that no one in the story could occupy and in fact bounces between geographic and temporal time zones that no one person could be privy to. Similarly, there is no attempt to explain how actual action and discourse were observed and then compiled into one narrative sequence. Consequently, one has the distinct impression that the narrative sequence has broken free of a simpler form of narration and now is the product of literary genius that chose to re-create the world as need be. Though it might be objected that this level of imagination is compatible with oral narratives, I would respond that the scope of poetic license is simply much expanded in many Mahāyāna works, even to the extent that it exceeds the viewpoint of the buddhas. In other words, these texts seem to

have arrogated the right to make and remake the world as they saw fit and on a scale that surpasses the scope of prior forms of narrating. How and why this massive shift in scope occurred is a recurring issue in this book.

The sixth form of narrative evidence is only convincing in the context of the close readings that I provide below, but I mention it here to foreshadow those arguments. A portion of Mahāyāna sūtras seem dedicated to undermining and overturning the basic building blocks of the Buddhist tradition. Hence, whereas early Buddhist rhetoric struggles to validate itself in the face of Brahmanic criticism, Mahāyāna rhetoric regularly takes as its primary target traditional Buddhism. Thus, at times, the clergy, the traditional teachings, the familiar ritual forms, the monasteries, and even the buddhas, are brought in for a kind of negation that is thoroughgoing in a manner again at odds with earlier forms of Buddhist discourse. In particular, Buddhism as a tradition seems objectified and externalized as a reality that can be overcome and mastered from some higher vantage point. This gesture of overcoming tradition is regularly linked in the narratives to finding closure around the text itself, and thus there are reasons for imagining that this gesture of radically overcoming tradition was only possible through the advent of a new medium that (1) likely escaped established and ingrained oral models of managing discourse and authority and (2) could ground its "revolution" in its own physical textuality that could serve as a bodylike presence for the fabricated voice of the Buddha. Thus it is that so many Mahāyāna texts eviscerate the form and content of prior forms of tradition and then offer themselves, as texts, as the summation of the form and content of tradition.

This point about the narrative essentially killing tradition only then to supersede it and re-create it within its own borders seems to go hand in hand with a very different treatment of time in many Mahāyāna works—which I take to be the seventh form of evidence. Whereas pre-Mahāyāna works are often set in the simple past tense of what the Buddha might have said on some occasion, or in a previous lifetime, Mahāyāna sūtras seem to be narrated from positions that are temporally much more flexible and that often organize action to promote the possibility of giving the reader direct encounters with the buddha/s. I count this as a form of evidence in favor of literary composition because the texts seem composed fairly far from the earlier oral versions of Buddhist teachings, under very different circumstances, when all sorts of techniques might be employed for drawing the reader into imagining intense engagements with the buddha/s, promises that in early non-Mahāyānic forms of discourse would be out of place if not scandalous. That is, insofar as the argument for the oral origins of Mahāyāna texts is often cast as the hope that the textual versions of Mahāyāna sūtras might have long chains of oral history behind them, the rather prominent feature of overcoming time to get back to the buddha/s suggests that they were composed

in zones of Buddhist history fairly far from the living memory of the Buddha when alienation seems to have been assumed. Thus the ingenuity of Mahāyāna narratives suggests an urgency and audacity that speaks not to the recycling of long trains of received orality, steady in their confidence that these traces trail back to the origin of tradition, but to stunningly inventive and insistent techniques for suddenly getting to the heart of tradition. Arguably, then, just this tenor of "the new solution" jibes much better with the advent of a literary overhaul of tradition and much less with the slow percolation of oral narratives. Or put differently, many Mahāyāna sūtras seem to delight in having found strikingly new ways to be Buddhist, and the promotion of these forms seems much more a part of developing new religious techniques related to textuality than the simple evolution in oral narration.

Taken together, these seven points of evidence ought to be convincing for assuming that many Mahāyāna sūtras were first produced as literary compositions. However, this hardly closes the discussion, and I need to mention at this early point in the book a set of complicated interactions that might have occurred between oral and literary forms of Mahāyāna discourse, exchanges that I am not able to demonstrate but still ought to be put squarely before the reader. First, as Jan Nattier has recently argued in the case of the early Mahāyāna text *Ugraparipṛcchā,* there may be good reasons to speak of the "sūtrafication" of discourse in which a narrative or discussion at first appears simply as the words of a particular Buddhist teacher and then is gradually morphed into the voice of the Buddha, thereby gaining value and sanctity.[5] This model seems plausible enough for some of the simpler Mahāyāna sūtras, but it is for the most part impossible to document. Moreover, it is quite clear that the narratives of some Mahāyāna works are too taken with proving their legitimacy to fit this model, which essentially only imagines that the names of speakers were changed here and there.[6] As Nattier admits, this model likely will not work for most other Mahāyāna texts.[7]

Nonetheless, it seems to me altogether possible that even once Mahāyāna authors started to write self-justifying narratives posing as the original word of the Buddha, there could have been a steady cycle of exchange between written and oral forms of Mahāyāna discourse. Thus, once the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* was written, it could have been partially memorized in a condensed form that circulated free of the text—this is actually recommended by the text itself—and which then was later written down and re-

5. See her *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to "The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)"* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), p. 11 ff.

6. Nattier's argument that this model might fit the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* is much less convincing, and one can go through her series of points to argue that what she takes as evidence for sūtrafication could be better taken as evidence for imagining basic authorial invention.

7. Nattier, *A Few Good Men,* p. 13 n. 4.

edited, say, in the condensed form of the *Diamond Sūtra,* which shares so many passages and forms with the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines.*

This pulsing back and forth between mediums, while interesting and likely representative of some of these developments, need not upset my basic assumption of literary construction: it doesn't really matter where an author got grist for his text—an oral recitation of a literary work or a reading of a sūtra he might have seen while visiting a friend in a neighboring village. What matters the most for my readings is just that act of fictitiously generating the voice of the Buddha to reconstruct authority and to draw the reader-listener into a completely innovative account of Buddhist truth and legitimacy. Just that audacious fictionalizing of tradition, with the accompanying literary maneuvers to cloak that act, are paramount for my reading, since that fictionalizing seems to grow out of a literary culture and represents an altogether different appreciation for language, communication, and the play of authority and legitimacy.

And, of course, addressing this role of knowingly reconstructing the Buddhist tradition is precisely what the field of Buddhist studies has been reluctant to address. In the end, Nattier's model of the sūtrafication of Buddhist discourse, just like the hope that there is some kind of honest orality or living community supporting the Mahāyāna texts, avoids and postpones the discussion of what it means when authors actually set out to seduce their audiences with new versions of tradition. In short, while there is a very rich discussion to have here, part of that discussion has to face the difficult topics of willful misrepresentation and irony—topics I will return to in the later chapters of this book.

AGGRESSION AND ACADEMIA

Despite the rewards of reading Buddhist texts as literature, reading against the grain has a certain aggressiveness built into it that warrants mention. In the acknowledgments in *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism,* I briefly mention the aggressiveness of the historian who moves from era to era, bounding over the heads of the historical actors as he or she crafts a narrative explanation of their lived events, a narrative that would have remained unavailable to the participants confined to only one sector of time. Ironically, then, history in this macro sense is invisible to those who lived it. The aggression of the close reader is in a sense parallel to the historian's insofar as both hope to see more than the normal participant. In the case of the close reader, the text is read and analyzed with the expectation of catching sight of more levels of signification "in" the text than would have been available to the traditional reader and, at times, perhaps even the author.

In either case, what is distinctively aggressive and self-aggrandizing in the venture is that the historian and the literary critic claim to have overviews

and insights that the participants lack. I see nothing wrong with assuming this privileged perspective as long as it is admitted that this all changes when that privileged position itself is taken as a subject for close reading, thereby revealing things about itself that had remained opaque and unthought. This chain of disappearing awareness and authority arises from the fact that the act of looking at something means that you will be blind to other things and, in particular, the very way you are looking, and more, the way you might appear *to* others as you look at them.

For a fully dialectical example of the shifts in authority that are produced when the looker is looked at, one could, for instance, agree with Foucault and read Freud as a cog in the development of twentieth-century state-managed subject control, but this ought not to prevent the reverse—bringing Foucault in for Freudian analysis. Either position is potentially valid *and yet is still* vulnerable to the very Other that it thought it was dominating in its analysis. The point is that there is nothing to be ashamed of in claiming, at least temporarily, a privileged reading position, as long as it is admitted that all positions are suitable for "higher" readings. Furthermore, we probably ought to admit that all readings, even the gentle and noninvasive ones, are constituted through invoking and practicing certain privileges against their sources and against other interpretations, traditional or otherwise.

Actually, in working to produce "higher readings," the argumentation of this book is in many ways as mundane as that of a standard book review: I have for each of the texts attempted to respeak its form, content, tone, logic, claims to value, polemical agenda, and so on. This very simple "coming to language" about the language of the texts—a reader's twist on the painter's dictum to paint just what you see—works well to open up the texts' logic and renders them thinkable in a more stabilized and graspable manner.

A HISTORY OF CONSTRUCTION AND SOME LIABILITIES

To give some insight into the way I have come to these arguments and perspectives, I should explain that this book was once a very long introduction to a very long book titled *Patriarchs on Paper in Chinese Buddhism.* The structure of that book was to have been twofold: to move from examining the paternal tropes in a number of important Indian Buddhist literature, as read in Chinese translation, to the developments in seventh- and eighth-century genealogical writing that ultimately led to Chan Buddhism. Thus, originally, my plan was to present an array of literary strategies that would have been available to Chinese writers as they again reconstructed truth, authority, and legitimacy in what was to turn into the Chan tradition. Essentially this original program of reading Chan literature against these sūtra templates still informs *Text as Father,* but I have separated the arguments into two books so as to give both sides of the argument fuller treatment. Given

this original agenda, I have here and there left in comments about how we ought to approach Chan's appropriation and reconstruction of a number of claims to paternal truth and authority as they appear in the sūtras.

However, structuring an argument that locates Chan as a rather late development in a long sequence of overcoming truth and authority in Buddhist rhetoric has two points of tension that I do not want to paper over. First, in reading these sūtras with the hope of building the context for Chan, I have walked into a serious problem: I offer here accounts of Indian narratives as they appear in Chinese. Obviously, for trying to imagine situations in India this approach has drawbacks, deriving mainly from the added hermeneutical trouble of interpreting Indic material through the lens of Chinese translations—naturally, direct access to the Sanskrit versions of these texts would have been preferred. However, several factors lessen the gravity of this problem. For instance, given the clear fact that these sūtras were, especially early on in their careers, somewhat unstable in form and content, working from Chinese sources presents a useful angle for understanding their development. As long as we avoid fixating on some imagined ur-text as the only valuable version in the often convoluted history of these works, then the Chinese translations will be useful on several levels.

A more important reason for valuing the Chinese translations is that in some cases Sanskrit manuscripts have not survived for these texts, and in other cases they have not been critically edited because of the complexities of the recensions and the paucity of sources. For instance, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* does not survive in Sanskrit, so we have no choice but to read it in Chinese or Tibetan translation. On the other hand, though various recensions and fragments of the *Lotus Sūtra* survive in Sanskrit, a satisfactory critical edition and translation has yet to appear, despite several attempts over the past one hundred sixty years.[8] Similarly, while a Sanskrit manuscript

8. For reflections on the state of modern studies of the *Lotus Sūtra,* see Gérard Fussman's "Histoire du monde indien," in *Annuaire du Collège de France, 1995–1996: Résumé des cours et travaux* (Paris: Collège de France, 1996), pp. 779–99. For interesting details on the earliest translation of the *Lotus Sūtra,* see Daniel Boucher's "Gāndhārī and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 188, no. 4 (October 1998): 1–36. For a discussion summing up Japanese research on the recensions of the *Lotus Sūtra,* see Michael Pye's *Skilful Means* (London: Duckworth, 1978), App. B, pp. 168–82. Though I agree with Pye and Fuse Kogaku (who he cites as his main source for this part of his assessment of the structuring of the *Lotus Sūtra*) that the first set of chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* represent an integral whole, I believe that it is a mistake not to include the tenth chapter as the cap to that initial sequence. Based on Fuse's argument that since the tenth chapter includes self-referential terminology that specifically means "book," *pustaka,* Pye argues that it is not of a piece with the preceding chapters. I believe the argument ought to go the other way, since, as in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti,* just that kind of book language is exactly what one would expect to find at the end of such a sequence because it serves to ground the faux orality that preceded it in its thingified presence as book.

of the *Vimalakīrti* has been discovered recently in Japan, it has yet to be published, and there is no reason to assume that it will represent an earlier or somehow more authentic recension than the one that Kumārajīva worked from, though of course it will be interesting to see how it relates to Kumārajīva's version.[9] As for the *Diamond Sūtra,* Sanskrit manuscripts have survived in several places, and yet, according to Gregory Schopen, this text too has not been published in a reliable critical edition and translation.[10] Given this state of affairs, and especially in a work such as this one that is focused on narrative structures and strategies more than on philological issues or technical terminology, there are only minimal risks in working from Chinese versions of these narratives.

The second tension in this book revolves around the possible complaint that I have not sufficiently historicized these texts. For instance, some readers might respond that I have not associated the sūtras with particular Indian schools or geographic regions, or traced their careers in the Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan commentaries. This criticism has some bite but should not be seen as damning. Here is why. First, each of these texts claims that it is at the center of the Buddhist tradition—the be-all and end-all of all Buddhist truth. Given this strident claim to uniqueness and self-sufficiency, each of these texts warrants a reading on its own terms, free of the refractions provided by later commentators who inevitably had other interests. Of course, even to read a text with a commentary requires having independently read the "target" text in order to gauge the various ways that the commentary is reconfiguring the original. Moreover, to assume that commentators "speak" for tradition is already to commit to a rather naive reading of the text, the commentary, and the image of tradition that supposedly holds them together. As usual, faced with this swirl of text, commentary, and tradition, there's no way to find an uncompromised site to enter the hermeneutical circle.

Equally important, it is probably already obvious that I am reading these narratives in a manner diametrically opposed to traditional commentaries, which are almost exclusively laudatory, submissive, and adamant in avoiding just the issues of fabrication and reader seduction that I am raising here. That is, by exploring the narrative architecture at play in structuring a reading experience, I am digging into the very topics that would ruin these texts as valuable and authoritative for traditional commentators. Consequently, it is precisely because I am interested in how these texts work as symbolic pro-

9. For reference to this finding, see Jan Nattier, "*The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa):* A Review of Four English Translations," *Buddhist Literature* 2 (2000): 235.

10. For Schopen's comments on prior publications on the *Diamond Sūtra* and a critical edition and translation of a manuscript found at Gilgit, see his "The Gilgit Manuscript of the Vajracchedikā," in *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle,* ed. Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan A. Silk (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 89–139.

grams designed to mold the reader's desires and images of truth and legitimacy that the traditional commentaries will have little to contribute.

To offer an analogy: my reading of these texts differs from the traditional commentaries as much as a critique of modern football, say, akin to Pierre Bourdieu's essay "Sports and Social Class," differs from the standard weekend sports wrap-up offered on network television.[11] In the case of Buddhist commentaries or the weekend sports wrap-up, the commentaries are in-house insofar as they assume the parameters of the "game" without reflecting on the constructedness of the cultural activity or its implications for subject formation and general modes of consumption and social praxis. In short, though the project that I am engaging here could be profitably expanded to include how traditional commentators consumed and framed these sūtras, those commentaries, too, will have to be read in a critical, against-the-grain manner. Most important, the commentaries, written essentially as acts of piety, won't ever be able to contend with issues of fabrication and the play of authorial intent in the clandestine reconstruction of tradition.

In lieu of relying on later commentaries to provide an interpretive context, it should become increasingly evident in what follows that the sūtras can be read next to one another as belonging to a shared intellectual and religious climate. Once we identify the dominant elements that structure these narratives we will see that these sūtras have much more in common with one another than was previously thought. Thus, against a kind of "school" or "sect" approach to these sūtras still favored by some researchers, I would argue that grouping the sūtras in this looser manner allows for a rich context to emerge simply from intertextalia. Recognizing this level of shared con-textuality seems to me to offer a kind of historical foundation that is as—if not more—telling than trying to figure out exactly when a text was written and by whom. Of course, we would like to know these details, but unfortunately the very nature of these texts as unadmitted forgeries makes it unlikely that we will ever know such basic information.

And finally on this point of avoiding traditional commentaries, though it won't be clear until the sequel to this book is published, my interest in these sūtras was, from the beginning, focused on reading them in a way that would intersect with what I take to be one wing of their traditional commentaries—early Chan literature. Thus from the outset I hoped to carry out my analysis in such a way as to build a body of interpretive approaches for reading early Chan literature as a very specific kind of commentary on these sūtras—a style of commentary that was deeply indebted to the sūtra form, even as it overcame that form. Though there is no doubt that these

11. For a slightly condensed version of Bourdieu's article, see Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 357–73.

sūtras served as the source for a substantial portion of early Chan rhetoric, we have not yet considered that Chan authors also read these texts to understand how authority was reconstructed in the tradition and, with these models in mind, went about the business of again reconstructing authority. The key here is that without first seeing how the rhetoric of reconstructing authority works in the sūtras, we have no way to judge how rhetoric works in Chan literature, or whether there might be deep resonances between them, as well as surprising inventions and discontinuities. To put it more sharply, I will be arguing that Chan authors only figured out how to "Vimalakīrti the tradition" by seeing how the *Vimalakīrti* "Vimalakīrtied the tradition." At any rate, by neglecting how Buddhist literature works as literature, we left off a chance to think about how tradition reconstructs itself by replaying and reworking its literary forms in such a manner that it can continue to recognize itself even as it continues to change.

One last caveat: in the past decade there has been a growing appreciation for the possibility that the sūtras that have received the most attention in modern Buddhist studies were not necessarily that important in the Indian tradition. On this point, Jan Nattier, Gregory Schopen, and Jonathan Silk have made thoughtful arguments weighing the evidence for determining the historical importance of texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Vimalakīrti.* I'm in favor of these revisionist reflections but also feel that in these arguments there is a tendency to fix the criteria in too limited a manner. Thus while it is crucial to know whether a text was rendered in art, or cited in later commentaries, or grouped with other works in a compilation, this is but one set of criteria. Several other lines of influence and impact are equally important and need to be added to this list. For instance, if it can be shown that a text such as the *Lotus Sūtra* presents narrative material and rhetorical strategies that also appear in other sūtras, then we have good reason to count the *Lotus Sūtra* as important and perhaps even pivotal in the emerging literary culture of Mahāyāna Buddhism, regardless of the number of times it is explicitly cited or drawn on in later commentaries.

This is even more important when we consider that early Mahāyāna writers apparently were writing many more sūtras than commentaries, and in writing sūtras they could not directly quote one another, since to do so would show that their construction of the Buddha's orality was derivative of the writing culture to which they belonged—a problem that I consider more closely in chapter 1. More important, it seems to me altogether possible that what was important in the early phases of Mahāyāna writing might not have been that important or even acceptable at later phases. Thus it is *not* useful to assume that because the later incarnations of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism had little use for the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa,* these earlier works were not crucial in preparing foundational elements for those later phases.

1

Text as Father

Tradition is just the illusion of permanence.
WOODY ALLEN, *Deconstructing Harry*

TEXTUAL PATERNITY

Though Buddhism was constructed around the act of "leaving the family," the motif of paternity is actually quite prominent in Buddhist discourse. In the early literature of the Mahāyāna, the so-called Great Vehicle of Buddhism that arose several hundred years after Buddhism was founded, fathers of various sorts, familial, monastic, and ontological, are arguably even more in evidence. What this book seeks to do is give close readings of four of these early Mahāyāna texts to point out how these patriarchal rhetorics work, especially vis-à-vis the textuality that housed them, and then to begin to sketch a kind of literary culture that appears to have supported and encouraged the writing of just these kinds of texts.

My choice of the four works covered in this book certainly privileges my interpretive agenda, and I do not want to give the impression that they are necessarily a well-balanced sampling of early Mahāyāna writing. One could easily point to a large number of early Mahāyāna sūtras that do not present sophisticated narratives and do not rely on these complex techniques for generating authority for themselves. In fact, it would be very useful, and interesting, to begin to build something like a lexicon for these early sūtras in which their formal rhetorical and narrative strategies are identified. A thumbnail sketch of such a lexicon would include sūtras that are largely about new forms of Buddhist ethics and function basically as lists of good and bad behavior with little rhetoric in place to seduce the reader into these practices. Another category might include texts that present, not themselves as the solution to getting at the totality of tradition, but another item—be it the name of a buddha or a particular samādhi.[1] These texts often can be shown

1. Two good examples of this kind of rhetoric are the *Pratyutpanna Samādhisūtra* and the smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra.* For a translation of the former, see Paul Harrison, trans., *The*

to work in a manner parallel to the sūtras considered here, but they also show divergent strategies in rewriting and condensing tradition. A third category could be those sūtras that seem to come a bit later, such as the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra,* and seek to harmonize and solidify a range of positions apparently already on the field of Mahāyāna polemics. Beyond these basic groupings, which could be significantly expanded, we should also leave room for a potpourri class, as it is quite clear that many Mahāyāna sūtras evince writing styles that move between various strategies and likely were written by more than one author and then reedited several times with different goals in mind.

However involved such a lexicon of early Mahāyāna writing might end up, by focusing on these four texts, I hope to draw out a number of thematics and literary strategies that seem crucial to at least one wing of Mahāyāna writing, and likely will be of use in approaching other Mahāyāna texts, even those much less reliant on explicit patriarchal figures. Hence, by investigating the symbolic machinery at work in these narratives, I believe we will gain significant advantages for understanding the desires and fears of at least a sector of Mahāyāna authors and their intended readers, and it is precisely on this field of desire and fear that the paternal figures appear so prominently.

For instance, in the *Lotus Sūtra,* conversion to the *Lotus Sūtra* is defined as the sole means for being legitimately Buddhist and reclaiming one's true sonship to the Buddha. The efficacy of this contorted reading gesture is guaranteed by a Buddha-figure in the narrative who claims to know all beings as his sons and who is prepared to legitimize them as such, once they convert to just this narrative about fathers and sons. Obviously, this elaborate "reinduction" into the Buddhist family is set up to serve as the grounds for replacing traditional Buddhist identity with a new Mahāyāna identity, a process that follows from aggressively replotting the narratives that traditional Buddhists had relied on to explain their identities and destinies. Moreover, this renarratization of Buddhist identity is largely based on a complex process of negating and sublating traditional forms of Buddhist sonship, a procedure that naturally also requires faith in a new kind of paternal master-signifier in order to work properly. As I show in chapters 2 and 3, convincing the reader of the veracity and availability of this newly minted Buddhist sonship, and then of the limitless value won from worshiping the text that promises this new

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Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra/The Śūraṃgama Samādhi Sūtra (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1998). For a translation of the latter, see Luis O. Gómez, trans., *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996); and for a discussion of its narrative strategies, see my forthcoming "Of Texts and Tongues: Orality, Textuality, and Pleasure in the Land of Bliss."

sonship, exceeds other doctrinal concerns in the text. With this sort of evidence in view, the father-son motif clearly warrants special attention as a meta-level governor that generated a host of other forms and contents in the text, and, equally important, defined the reader's expected reception of those forms and contents. Given these opening comments, it should be clear that I am aiming for a reading in which the medium and the message are inseparable.[2]

AND THE WORD BECAME LETTER

To offer an imperfect analogy for the way I am treating the form and function of tradition-sublating Mahāyāna sūtras, imagine that there arose in Italy in the year 600 C.E. a chain letter that claimed to contain within its borders the totality of Christian truth, as well as the ability to make that truth directly available to the reader, in lieu of any other kind of contact with the Christian tradition. Furthermore, it explained that if the recipients of this letter accepted and reproduced the letter, with its account of His full support of the letter and His presence therein, then such readers would have fulfilled all the religious expectations that God had for them. Last, faithful readers would be promised to finally gain the identity of "child of God," which, according to the letter, had only been illegitimately bestowed on earlier Christians who had received the Gospels' version of divine paternity but had not received and accepted the letter.

In making this audacious claim, the letter would do well to explain in detail what was wrong, limited, and impossible with the prior dispensation of truth in the traditional version of Christianity and how the chain letter version of Christianity overcame those obstacles and shortcomings to deliver this totalizing narrative in the only form that matched God's original and undeviating intent. In attempting to undermine and hollow out standard Christianity in this manner, the chain letter would also naturally seek to explain how it itself served as the unique mediator between God and the reader. Here, the letter's narrative might attempt to explain how some measure of divine presence had been brought within its own borders, allowing it to "directly" present God to the reader. If this were claimed, then the letter would take on relic-like qualities as it promised to deliver divine presence in a material form, even as it promised to return the believer to the Father.

In these narrative ploys, the letter would have to concern itself with just the kind of triangle I sketched in the introduction, with paternal essence, textual vehicle, and reader carefully arrayed and engaged to provide for

2. On this topic I have been particularly influenced by Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and Hayden White.

their needed contact in this aggressive reconstitution of the Christian tradition. And it would have to evolve a rather sophisticated rhetoric for explaining its origins in the nontextual Father and how worship of the text—as both narrative and divine presence—would ultimately be able to return the reader to the Father. Or put otherwise, the narrative would have to explain its own origins in such a way that its doorlike function of leading the reader back to the Father would appear as a natural consequence of its own production in the Father. The narrative, then, would have to work at making its own "sonship" appear as the cause of being able to legitimately "refather" the reader.[3]

This example, with some refinements, is not that far from characterizing the form and function of the Mahāyāna sūtras that I treat here. While I'm not claiming that this is all that the vast corpus of Mahāyāna literature covers, still, clarifying this triangle of paternal essence, text, and reader does offer us a useful paradigm for interpreting many of the basic dynamics that can be found throughout a number of Mahāyāna sūtras.

THINGIFIED TRUTH—THE STUFF OF PATRIARCHY

To explore the intricacies of Mahāyāna sūtras presenting themselves as the totality of the Buddhist tradition, it is crucial to reflect on the narrative process whereby discourse and paternity were thingified. To get a sense for how this thingification works, let me note that on one level these narratives established parallel tracks for textuality and paternity. Regularly it was claimed that transmission of the text created and extended Buddhist patriarchies of truth—as in the case of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* or the *Vimalakīrti*—and that it was these discourses as the transmitted item that linked buddhas together in paternal succession. But besides this simple ploy to externalize themselves in valorizing "historical" scenes, there clearly is another level that has to do with solidifying or thingifying rhetoric about paternal origins into something nonlinguistic and exquisitely perfect, powerful, and, best of all, present. Thus the narratives' flow of nouns and verbs about fathers and sons collapses into a solid nonlinguistic totality of truth and patriarchy, even if this collapse is only accomplished through the

3. I chose to offer the image of this chain letter overhauling the Christian tradition specifically because it is also worth reflecting on the possibility that early Christian rhetoric actually functioned a bit like this, with the Pauline letters and the Gospels explaining a new conduit to God that was built around a father-son transmission presented in narrative form that, if taken as true and beyond narrative construction, would refather the recipient as a real "child of God" and supplant the Jewish tradition as it had been previously known. I will consider this problem more fully in another publication, once the Buddhist version of refathering is more clearly in view.

linguistic work of the narrative itself. Thus it is that according to the rhetoric of the *Vimalakīrti,* holding the *Vimalakīrti* text in one's hands equals the presence of the Buddha and produces magical, talismanic functions. Clearly, written language has this unique ability to define and advertise its own presence and in this manner literally articulates a place for itself in the reader's symbolic system.

To clarify how these rhetorics work this triangle of presence, reference, and desire, consider the situation of finding a sentence on the pavement that reads, "This sentence was written with 14k gold chalk," a claim that produces a slightly complicated situation in which language as form and language as content are brought together. The sentence as rhetoric—the sensible sentence in English about the kind of chalk used—provides information about the sentence's reality as dusty, yellow orthographic presence. On the other hand, the particular handwriting style, size, density, gold elements, and so on, present the form needed by the rhetoric in its task of explaining the nature of the stuff of orthography.

In a similar way, narratives in these Mahāyāna texts first claim to derive from the various truth-fathers and then explain that the narrative as textual presence partakes, in a physical way, in that essence of the truth-father figure that had just been conjured up in the narrative. Thus these narratives recount patrilineal descent in order to collapse or condense that patriarchal truth within their borders. Consequently, truth-essence is first demonstrated moving through a lineage, only to have it then essentially poured into the text where that truth-essence comes to rest as a timeless and yet physical presence. In a rather brilliant way, then, these texts exploit the dual presence of textual discourse—its literary content and the stuff on which it is written—in an effort to offer paternal essences to the reader. That is, in addition to recognizing themselves as alienated language set free of the human body, these texts seem quite aware of making use of the text's physical presence—on palm leaves, presumably—that could receive, contain, and deliver the paternal essence that the narrative was constructing. In effect, then, these alienated forms of "textual orality" are being subtly reinvested in a substitute body of sorts. Thus, the *Diamond Sūtra* will claim, just as the *Vimalakīrti* had, that wherever it is, there one should believe there is a buddha or one of his revered disciples.

At first this might seem logical and uninteresting: sūtras about the origins of tradition simply explain themselves to be the representatives of those origins. However, on reflection, we can see that there is something sophisticated and counterintuitive at work here, and it has to do with the word *re-present.* As the narratives seek to collapse themselves into the books that hold them, it seems like something magical or alchemical is occurring: the rhetorical and physical aspects of the text end up balancing

one another in a completely workable manner just as in the case of the sentence on the sidewalk, "This sentence was written with 14k gold chalk." Obviously the goal is to get the patriarchal explanation of paternal presence to appear as actual patriarchal presence. However, this literary gambit will only work if the reader has been enticed into reading "through" the narrative to find "behind" the narrative, the vastness of patriarchal truth and legitimacy that the narrative constructed "back there," and then accept the teachings of such paternal figures who insist that their legitimacy and presence is recoverable in the totality of the narrative in both its rhetorical and physical forms. The deepest irony here is that one first ignores the narrative as physical text in order to give full presence to the paternal figures produced in the rhetoric, even as these figures then instruct the reader to return to the text as object and treat it as their direct representative.

In fact, all the texts that I consider here work around rhetorics that are intent on thingifying their narratives into a singular, physical representation of themselves as a total Thing that it has bound within the text's interior, not as a heterogeneous and complex set of narrative segments, but rather as the pure invisible truth-patriarchy that it constructed to give it legitimacy in the first place. Arguably in these sūtras, then, discourse seeks to become a relic in the full Buddhist sense of a living presence that is the condensation of the Buddha. Thus, just as the life of the Buddha or a saint is believed to be condensed in his remains, so, too, do these narratives hope to turn their narrative enterprises into hallowed presences. In keeping with this parallelism, perhaps we should say that just as the cremation of the saint's body is that magical process that confers on the remains the totality of the saint's life and sanctity, so, too, does finishing the narrative and believing it to be from the father and of the father, since in submitting to the narrative, one "cremates" that language in order to render it in this relic form of the book, now physically infused with the presence of the truth-father.

In this complex process of rediscovering "descent," the narrative has to rely on substantializing truth in the paternal figure, the text, and the reader, all three of which are, in the reader's imagination, to find themselves inhabited by the presence of paternal truth and the totality of tradition that it vouches for. If the reader accepts the narrative's claims, truth in this thingified form can flow directly into the narrative and then into his own being where it finds a version of itself already properly installed. This always-already aspect of the rhetoric makes the reader's assent to the narrative easier and more delightful, particularly because it does not look like assent at all but rather the recuperation of that which was always already true, especially before the narratives explaining innate essences showed up.

MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS AS ANTINOVELS

Given the richness of these narrative operations, and especially their self-reflexive gestures, it is worth trying to locate their rhetorical machinery in some wider, comparative framework. Looked at vis-à-vis Western literature, perhaps the most important thing to say is that each of these texts seems to be the antithesis of the modern novel—and for three reasons. First, there is very little character development. The texts are largely mathematical in moving essences and value around, and individual players are important only through the roles that they play or for their symbolic associations. Conversion sequences do occur—Śāriputra and others in the *Lotus Sūtra,* as well as Subhūti in the *Diamond Sūtra*—but there is nothing especially personal about these moments. In either case, the figures simply seem to stand as metonyms for the unregenerated form of the Buddhist tradition, and their conversions are narrated to stimulate a similar reaction in the reader. Moreover, by proving the narrative's efficacy in converting stalwart emblems of tradition, the narrative gains legitimacy by having old tradition validate new tradition. Similarly, characters do not really exist on specified life timelines: their ages aren't mentioned, no life events intrude, and they do not worry about getting things in order before they die.

Conversely, the death and apparent absence of the Buddha is a regular theme, since fundamentally these texts are designed to replace his presence and power. Thus the identity and life of the recipient are eclipsed by the effort to re-create the presence of the Buddha in the narrative and position the reader to interact with that textually present buddha. The details of any particular subject's life are therefore irrelevant and even encumbering to the texts' agenda to produce faith in the continuing textual presence of self-same Buddhist truth and identity. In fact, in several of these narratives there seems to be the implicit need for the subject to totally efface himself or herself in fulfilling the narrative's commands. Thus there is the call for a kind of reading-suicide that ironically is the doorway into final identity and life.

Second, there is no tragedy in these texts—nothing but happy endings here. There is no possible leak, distortion, or degradation in the gap between the narratives' patriarchs and the texts that are to deliver that paternity to the reader. The only risk is that the reader might turn away from the narrative, and this possible rejection is forestalled by explaining that such readers naturally lose their legitimacy, both as sons and as Buddhists, and, worse, are described by the Buddha-father as arrogant, dull, and headed for eons of punishment, or at least so says the *Lotus Sūtra.* This lack of tragedy makes perfect sense insofar as the texts are intent on collapsing time, not in chronicling its richly disturbing effects on human identity and meaning, as the modern novel is arguably intent on doing. In these Mahā-

yāna sūtras, the past is perfectly present within the narrative, and as long as the reader accepts this basic compression of time and "paternal" fidelity, then the book form of that narrative is poised to solve all problems of time, legitimacy, and alienation. Thus all anxieties about authenticity, legitimacy, and the maintenance of tradition are condensed in the reader's relationship to the narrative, which, itself, argues that it has solved all these problems.

Third, though all these texts are built around producing a kind of double vision in the reader, vis-à-vis tradition and legitimacy, I argue that there is, ultimately, no irony at work here if irony means upsetting and diverting the flow of meaning in the narrative. Though the sūtras are intent, in their interiors, on upending tradition as it was known, the effects of that displacement are never left unexplained or ambiguous. Thus though there may be radical and disconcerting language in the middle sections of the narrative, it seems to work in the service of the agendas announced by the framing of the narratives that are dedicated to that basic task of putting the totality of tradition into the physical perimeters of the text and offering it to the reader. Hence there is never any dangerous language in the explanation of the text's origins or its ability to deliver those origins to the reader. Similarly, the reader's response is to be univocal: pure desire and devotion. Nothing less will do, and certainly a cagey, ironic appreciation of the text's narrative ploys would be ruinous. Perhaps, then, we ought to say that the texts command an unironic consumption of irony since the reader is shown the collapse of stable tradition's meanings, and yet is told exactly what this means and what his response should be.

HOUSING AN ARGUMENT

To explore these connections among narrative, paternity, truth, and the seduction of the reader in Mahāyāna literature, I chose to begin with the *Lotus Sūtra* for several reasons. First, its aggressive reformulation of an older version of Buddhist patriarchy allowed me to clarify a number of narrative ploys that would be useful in reading the other sūtras. Second, its enchanting layering of several sets of fathers and sons showed how images of paternity were relied on to both seduce the reader and cloak that seduction in the gauze of always-already. Third, the *Lotus Sūtra* is an excellent example of how Mahāyāna writers linked conversion to their texts with "rediscovering" one's ultimate sonship to the Buddha, a double-jointed gesture in which the current reading moment determines one's past relationship to the Buddha-father, even as that father only takes form in the reading moment. Thus believing the *Lotus Sūtra* and holding to its definition of the Mahāyāna pro-

gram of value and identity seem to involve refathering oneself in a two-step act of faith: first, the reader installs a father in the text by accepting that this text is not just any narrative but one that comes from the father who irrefutably knows the reader as son; and second, the reader allows that father-in-the-text to present his knowledge of the reader's past sonship as an undeniable extratextual reality that was true before the son came into existence, and certainly true before he started reading this text on fathers and sons.[4] It is just this process of "reproductive reading" that warrants calling texts "fathers" and speaking of "textual patriarchy" because once the text has induced faith in the narrative of fathers and sons as *from* the father, the text has effected a new identity in the reader based on a new notion of his own intimate involvement in a Buddhist patriarchy.

Given its overall richness and its rather extended discussion of Buddhist paternalism, I privileged the *Lotus Sūtra* by analyzing it first, in chapters 2 and 3, and by using it as a proving ground for a number of interpretive frameworks that I export to my treatment of other texts. Though I have privileged the *Lotus Sūtra* in organizing my argument, I believe Jonathan A. Silk is largely right in pointing out that we need to be much more cautious in assuming the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Indian Buddhism.[5] And yet, though I accept many of the points in his argument, I think he may be defining influence in too narrow a fashion. As the rest of this book argues, the *Lotus Sūtra* appears to have been part of an evolving matrix of literary techniques that was shared by several centuries of writers. Thus, though direct quotes may be limited or absent in later scholastic works, it is crucial to look for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s influence on other Buddhist texts on the level of narrative ploys and plot schema, categories that were not included in Silk's list of types of influences that one should consider.[6]

There is, too, a much larger problem looming here: what if early Mahāyāna Buddhism has little to do with middle or late period Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly once it was institutionalized in the big university-style monasteries? Imagining such tectonic shifts, it seems to me that we should not assume a steady transmission of "tradition" from the early period to the middle and late period, and we ought not, as Silk seems to do, judge the early period simply in terms of how the later one came to relate to that early

4. This is, in essence, a process that requires the reader to read "past" or "beyond" the language of fathers and sons in order to accept as fundamentally true the tautological statement, "Believe me when I say I am your father because, after all, I am your father."

5. See Silk's "The Place of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Indian Buddhism," *Journal of Oriental Studies,* vol. 39, no. 2 (2001): 87–105.

6. See esp. Silk, "The Place of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Indian Buddhism," p. 88.

one. To put it succinctly, what might have been terribly important for Mahāyānists in the first century C.E. might have become secondary and even embarrassing to seventh- or eighth-century Mahāyānists.

Following the *Lotus Sūtra* are close readings of the *Diamond Sūtra* (chap. 4) and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* (chap. 5), where I consider how images of truth and perfect paternity work; even if these sūtras are not as explicit as the *Lotus Sūtra* in announcing father-son logics, they still provide very interesting constructions of pure reproduction through accepting the text as a parental figure. Chapter 6 on the *Vimalakīrti* concludes my study, because the fascinating figure of Vimalakīrti represents the most vivid example of reconstructing authority and paternity through the negation and humiliation of tradition. Then, with the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*'s and the *Vimalakīrti*'s clear use of scenes and tropes that echo material from the *Lotus Sūtra,* I'll have evidence for opening up the fascinating problem of what kind of intentionality was behind the construction of these texts that are clearly indebted to other literary works, even as their authors avoided admitting that influence by creating "oral" truth-patriarchies in which to ground their writing, despite the fact that they presumably learned of such techniques for generating "oral" truth-fathers from *reading* parallel works. Thus I'll round out my argument by asking about that odd form of literary repetition in which these Mahāyāna authors so freely rewrote the paternal origins of Buddhist truth through reading and mimicking other authors who also were committed to just this kind of lèse-majesté.

THE TRANSMISSION OF TRANSMISSION

With these themes and problematics introduced, I would like to briefly mention some of the more complicated aspects of patriarchy that are useful for the discussions that follow. To preface these reflections, I should say that my comments are not committed to any particular theoretical paradigm—feminist, Lacanian, or Derridean—and instead have come largely from thinking about how paternal figures work in these Mahāyāna sūtras. Consequently, here and elsewhere I use the term "patriarchy" loosely to refer to styles of discourse and social practices that create and legitimize identity via paternal language that relies on the mythology of unseen male realities mystically moving between men, and sometimes to women too, but whose origin is always separate from women, sex, and physical bodies, and which never strays beyond the command of the father figure who is both the font of that paternal essence and the source of the language that defines, controls, and distributes that essence.

Employing this generic definition of patriarchy will assist in a number of readings, but it is worth pointing out here that as a symbolic system this form of generating identity has some peculiarities. For instance, a common

trope in most of these texts is the account of the father who fathers his sons, not with sex and women, but with language and, in particular, *the transmission of devotion to the idea of the perfect father who is able to perform just this kind of task.* Thus what ultimately marks successful patriarchal transmission in these sūtras is transmission of the idea that this kind of linguistic paternal transmission is, on its own, complete and valid for serving as the basis of one's identity. Or put otherwise, this patriarchal form of generating identity comes when the subject-to-be-identified takes the paternal figure and the legality of the entire narrative project as the final basis for finding the form, content, and destiny of his being. And, of course, this only happens when paternal language disappears into the paternal realities it conjures up, even as it demands to be repeated as language.

Recognizing how readers are seduced into new identifications with a narrative father, won simply from devoting oneself to the narrative of that father, should not seem bizarre given that fathers of all kinds are only found in narratives that link the "real" of present identity to some past creative moment, a past moment that nonetheless takes form in a current narrative process. This oddly means that in any patriarchal construction of the subject, one gains the essence, cause, base, or horizon of one's present identity by submitting to a narrative or history about a past fertility that is not visible anywhere but in the narrative. Looked at carefully, this kind of paternal narrative fuses current faith in the narrative to the narrative's account of that past moment of "first-cause" fertilization, a fusion that is only effected when the narrative plays the crucial role of stretching between two places in time, serving as a conduit in which the past fertility effectively moves forward to the reader, even as the reader's faith moves from the reading moment back to the fertile act. In producing this movement from reading to "being," the narrative effects an immaculate delivery of an immaculate identity that crosses time and differences, of many kinds, to install an untrammeled version of a past essence in the present. That is, the narrative's ability to confuse paternal language with paternal being will be the basis for the son confusing a *theory* of his being with his being.

In all this we should not miss that the narrative seems to father the son at the same time that it fathers itself, relaying itself and the son back to that preceding "spark" that gave birth to both of them, even as we ought to say that the narrative gave birth to the whole series: the father himself, the spark, the son, and, of course, the narrative of father and son, with its emphasis on some continuing paternal essences. Given the inevitable dependence of this dual track of narrative and paternity, it is no wonder that narrative and patriarchy are so completely linked: both transmit images of sameness across chasms of time and difference, and, quite likely, neither could exist without the other.

Part of initiating a fantasy of "reinclusion" in an all-male family through

the consumption of this kind of father-son narrative is the intriguing dialectic in which the literary production of the image of some past perfect production requires that the particulars of the narrative's own production—when it was written, by whom, where, with what motivation, with what limitations, and so on—be erased and overlain with the image that the newly created father *in* the text was actually the father-author *of* the narrative he inhabits. Thus each of these texts disengages their discourses from contact with any particular moment in history in order to father a father who, once his identity is quite literally a nonissue, can turn to rather noisily father others through the dissemination of the very narrative that he himself relies on for his existence. Though there are several ways to cloak this circle of father-in-the-text who explains the text-about-the-father, the author's crucial challenge is to avoid introducing an external cause for this circle, and this can be achieved by making narratives-of-fathers and the fathers-in-the-narratives mutually productive. For this to happen, the authors of texts about perfect fathers have to disappear to give way to these textual fathers who rise up in the text to be in charge of reproduction, and even claim to produce the medium that produced them, the text.

FIELDS OF CONTENTION

Given this opening discussion, it is probably already clear that I need to locate my analysis in a larger history of Buddhist studies. To begin with, one might ask, Why after one hundred fifty years of Buddhist studies aren't there other books on this topic, if it is as prominent as you claim? A short answer would simply be that we have read Buddhist texts for other things. We have sought wisdom, purity, identity, security, and the pleasures of exoticism in these texts and have, on the contrary, not been interested in looking at how these desirable entities were constructed in these texts and how much these constructions often involve patriarchal formats, formats that might have on occasion seemed distressingly familiar to Western models. One only needs to reread Burton Watson's introduction to his translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* to see what a gap there is between the actual tone and content of the text and what Watson highlights as the tone and content of the text. I choose to criticize his comments simply because he is a trustworthy translator whose views on these texts are widely shared by both professional buddhologists and more casual readers of his translations.

Speaking of the content of the *Lotus Sūtra,* he asserts (pp. xiv–xv) that Mahāyāna Buddhism's worldview rests on a certain notion of emptiness, and this, he claims, is essential for understanding the text. However, there is in fact almost no discussion of emptiness in the *Lotus Sūtra;* I can find only one

passage that even begins to develop a view of emptiness, and this is tucked back in chapter 13 (p. 198), far from the formatting concerns of the text. Throughout the rest of this lengthy sūtra other issues are much more important, issues that coalesce around learning to despise one's prior Buddhist identity in order to convert to this text through a new recognition of one's sonship to the Buddha, won through consenting to the need for the conversion process itself. In fact, part of this rhetoric urgently advertising conversion includes the necessity of leaving off meditation on emptiness (p. 81), which is deemed tiresome and even decadent.

One does not need to engage in high-tech, postmodern analyses to see that effecting this conversion in the reader is the main work of the *Lotus Sūtra,* not the staid elucidation of some pure content, such as emptiness.[7] Actually, as we will see, content becomes increasingly hard to find in this text that is primarily about itself (a fact that Watson acknowledges, p. xx), which of course invites speculation that the text is propaganda in the fullest sense of the word; that is, what we need from you, the reader, is simply inspired submission to this discourse. However, shifting to such a reading is disturbing and puts in question the guidelines that have informed our reading of Mahāyāna sūtras. Furthermore, once one opens this door to say that the text is about the reader's seduction into the project of sublating older forms of Buddhism, many other monsters come springing out, and it becomes increasingly clear that we need to rethink and rewrite a history of Mahāyāna thought based on a much more sensitive and open-minded appreciation for what is actually contained in these texts.[8]

7. This criticism ought to be applied to Roger Jackson's recent review of Malcolm David Eckel's *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Jackson unequivocally states at the beginning of this review: "Emptiness (Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*), the lack of identity or self-existence *(svabhāva)* that is said to be the true nature of all phenomena, *is the most important single concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*" (*History of Religions* 35, no. 1 [1995]: 86 [emphasis added]). Obviously this is a problematic statement on several fronts. A quick look through many Mahāyāna sūtras suggests that emptiness is a rather peripheral topic for many Mahāyāna texts. Clearly, Mahāyāna writers defined themselves with a plethora of other terms, techniques, and ploys. Given this evidence, we have to ask, why exactly is Jackson saying this, and, since it is a fairly common remark, when and under what circumstances was this tradition of identifying the Mahāyāna in this manner generated? The Tibetan tradition came to see the distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna in this manner, but tradition's appropriation of itself may be far from a historically responsible account of tradition.

8. I should add that despite these overwhelming trends in twentieth-century depictions of the Mahāyāna, one can still find here and there thoughtful and careful comments on the nature of Mahāyāna literature. In addition to Schopen's thorough and insightful work, Lewis Lancaster's article on the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* is quite sensible and judicious in its account of the content of that sūtra; see his "The Oldest Mahāyāna Sūtra: Its Significance for the Study of Buddhist Development," *Eastern Buddhist* 8, no. 1 (1975): 30–41. Equally cogent is Paul Harrison's "Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10,

As already mentioned, at the forefront of a rereading of these texts is an awareness of the way that they are constructed to produce desire—desire for the text as a sublime object, desire for the presence of the Buddha in the text, desire for the merit that might be won from worshiping the text, or again simply the desire to be more than one was before reading the text. Assuming the seductive qualities of the *Lotus Sūtra* and others like it would ironically bring us much closer to Watson's purported goal: "The present translation is offered in the hope that through it readers of English may come to appreciate something of the power and appeal of the *Lotus Sūtra*" (p. xxii). If Watson had stopped right there, we likely would have received a very different presentation of the *Lotus Sūtra,* one that reflected more accurately the wiles of the narrative. However, Watson finishes this phrase by offering his own kind of seduction, portraying the contents of the text as unquestionably positive and useful for readers: "and that among its wealth of profound religious ideas and striking imagery they may find passages that speak compellingly to them as well." Exploring the complexities of why Buddhist scholars want their readers to desire Buddhism would take another book, but one can see that in the reproduction of the text for modern English readers, its role as seducer has remained intact, even as it is taken into the supposedly critical domains of modern research.[9]

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no. 1 (1987): 67–89. Currently, Richard Cohen, David McMahan, Jan Nattier, and Jonathan A. Silk are exploring thoughtful ways to recontextualize Mahāyāna identity and rhetoric.

9. One could point out that the choice of Monet's dreamy water lilies for the cover of Watson's translation, presumably chosen as an echo of the word *lotus* in the sūtra's title, perfectly demonstrates the inadequacies of Watson's introduction. "Lotus" in the text's title probably isn't there to invite romantic reverie in a tranquil garden setting but was employed in its standard Buddhist sense of pointing out a rare quality on an otherwise unattractive field of mud and muddy water. That is, the *Lotus Sūtra* is presenting itself as the only Buddhist teaching that matters on the otherwise muddy field of Buddhist discourse. Of course, this is a rather radical application of a metaphor that had a long history in Buddhist discourse. In Pāli literature this metaphor is often used to distinguish Buddhists from their supposedly more delusional Brahmanic neighbors. For instance, in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (p. 214 in Maurice Walshe's translation), we find the newly enlightened Buddha reflecting on the chances of converting anyone to his newfound truth. With the help of the god Brahma he comes to the conclusion that he should persevere in his teaching of sentient beings who in this realization are homologized with lotuses: "Some [sentient beings] are born in the water and, having reached the surface, grow out of the water and are *not polluted by it,*" thus making them suitable objects of teaching. In short, there are good reasons for thinking that the lotus in the title marks a very important shift in Buddhist polemics, found throughout the text, wherein the *Lotus Sūtra* does to Buddhism what Buddhism did to Brahmanic traditions. Hence the title marks a kind of internecine struggle within Buddhism in which a metaphor that used to be employed to distinguish Buddhists from non-Buddhists is turned on Buddhism itself. Now the "real" Buddhists are the believers in the *Lotus Sūtra* and all other "Buddhists" are just so much unresponsive mud. This reading of the lotus in the title is clearly supported by the content of the text, and yet in the hands of moderns this aggressive metaphor translates into the lazy ease of Monet's *Water Lilies.*

In setting out on this track, I am interested in recognizing Mahāyāna sūtras as a newly discovered religious tool, or better, a platform of pristine elocution, prized for its nearly limitless potential to signify alternative realities and then to draw readers into living within those newly defined structures of the Real, even as they inhabit this world.[10] This tension of living in two places at once is discernible in quite a few of these texts, and Mahāyāna literature in general might be said to be concerned with generating a stable and unironic appreciation for this kind of double vision, whether it be between nirvana and samsara, or this world and the Pure Land, or one's mundane personality and an innate Buddhist nature.[11]

BUDDHIST STUDIES: ON THE GROUND OR UP IN THE AIR?

Focusing on literary fantasy as the doorway to inhabiting alternative world systems seems to me the next phase of a dialectic begun in Buddhist studies when scholarly writing turned toward thinking about "Buddhism on the ground," that is, Buddhism as it was actually lived and practiced, not as it was idealized and prescribed in texts.[12] However, to focus on flights of fantasy in literature is not to discount the much-needed turn to an archaeological description of Buddhism; instead it simply asks that we return to Buddhist texts and read them not as descriptive of Buddhist practice but as constructive of particular tracks of desire that formatted the shape of Buddhist subjectivity. In other words, Buddhism on the ground always was fantastical and only makes sense within the purview of an extensively built up cosmos of the "sur-real," by which I mean that flowery and fantastic set of referents that, ironically, anchor one's perception of the here and now.

In reflecting on this dialectic in Buddhist studies, I think we have to admit that the problem has been that modern scholars have often wanted

10. I should clarify that my objective here is not to decide whether the advent of textuality was responsible for massive shifts in Buddhist thinking, as Walter Ong and others would expect. Instead, I am simply setting up a discussion of how the new technique of writing affected Buddhist rhetoric, especially in terms of redefining authority and value. What impact literature might have had on paradigm shifts in cognition, and so on, are beyond the scope of this work. For an assessment of the value of Ong's position for Buddhist Studies, see Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna," *Numen* 42 (1995): 21–47.

11. I should add that I am not assuming a nonmythic real that was then overlaid by the textual fantasy. Quite the opposite, the old set of fantasies are usually the basis for the second layer of fantasies, which, though claiming to supersede their matrix, still bear a rather dependent and parasitical relationship to their origins. In discussions of these multiple realities, I am particularly interested in understanding how the act of writing new fathers into existence gives identity to the reader that sustains the performance and perpetuation of these complex fantasies.

12. Gregory Schopen's work opened up this realm of scholarly thinking in Buddhist studies, and I have benefited much from his contributions. For a collection of his remarkable essays, see *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

to take at least some of the fantastic material in Buddhist literature as real, or least potentially real, in our own terms of the Real, terms that have remained studiously unexamined. Thus, for instance, though most modern scholars would not want to include as historical events splendiferous flowers falling from the sky or bejeweled reliquaries spontaneously bursting from the ground, still these same scholars seem to find discourses on the purification of the self through meditation, or the successful realization of one's true nature, as nonfantastic and acceptable prima facie. However, with a bit of reflection, these more philosophic- and soteriological-sounding items might seem as mythic and impossible as magical flowers and jumping reliquaries.

Given my interest in exploring how desire and fantasy work in these texts, I suppose that I ought to admit that, on occasion, there is a sort of nausea in this book. This is, I guess, simply the effect of taking Buddhist language as language and not as a natural bridge to a world beyond language that could be expected to return to support the language that first called attention to it. However, I did not purposefully plan to make readers queasy by resisting the siren's call of the signifier to dive into that pristine real beyond language, but nonetheless, by focusing on the techniques by which Buddhist texts work to create the certainty of these prelinguistic realities, I have ended up with a body of analyses that may leave the reader feeling as though I keep writing about the Buddhist attempt to write about a set of items that seem never to be present.

To make matters worse, there is an incessant form of hysteria in these texts, defined as the tantalizing possibility of achieving impossibly wonderful goals, and this high-pitched command to "be all you can't be" or "to be the perfect son who becomes his father" collides rather heavily with a feeling of claustrophobia born of holding meaning in a two-dimensional system of mutually referencing terms. In other words, the texts bustle with calls to jump up into the rarefied certainties of total knowledge, total power, total purity, and so on, and yet if one resists the texts' gestures, one sees that the only authority present to secure these leaps is other narrative examples of the leap. Thus, in attempting to hold a steady stream of incitements to miraculous achievements in a flat semiotic topography that grants equal significance to all statements made in a text, I have ushered in the chaotic reign of democratic meaning just in a domain filled with cacophonous claims to ultimacy.

For example, if we do not assume that a singular enlightenment is the final goal of all human experience, a point of closure that supposedly exists as the self-existent object behind all Buddhist rhetoric, then the careful reading of every aspect of a Buddhist text should be equally warranted, since all those aspects are presumably placed there to perform different rhetorical tasks that might tell us much about the text and the evolution of

tradition. Looking at choices that have been made in the past century of scholarship on Buddhism gives the impression that tarrying with the wide array of topics that appear in Buddhist texts was precluded by the anxiety that to do so would take us off-track and perhaps deny us a taste of the promised fruit of enlightenment or wisdom discussed in other choice passages.[13] Given the value that Watson and others have assumed is lodged in these texts, to reread them with an evenhandedness that has yet to decide what these texts are "about," hedges toward introducing a nihilism, since the assumed telos of the text under consideration is suspended, leaving a flat spirograph of rhetoric.

Nausea, claustrophobia, and nihilism, however, needn't be the result of my project. Instead, I would like to think that in close reading a number of Mahāyāna sūtras there is the satisfaction of reconsidering the construction of meaning in Buddhist rhetoric, which I hope at the very least adds to our sense of the history of humans' experimentation with literature and desire.

THE METASTASIS OF FATHERS

Without going more fully into the complex interplay of transcendence and immanence, past and present, form and content that must be invoked in even basic patriarchal claims, I want to close this overview with some brief reflections that return to the first sentence of this chapter—the apparent incongruity of patriarchal family figures in Buddhism, even though Buddhism emerged from a call to leave the family. In particular, I want to offer a model for understanding what I call the "metastasis of patriarchy," a perspective that I hope offers insight into the repeated attempt by Buddhist authors to reframe truth and legitimacy in the tradition by redrawing the lines of descent for father and son. To appreciate this process of reconceiv-

13. On another level, one might think, too, that just this kind of reading is patriarchal in nature as it seeks a selfsame essence beyond the heterogeneity of actual content. For example, much of what is written in traditional Buddhist studies begins to lose its clarity as soon as you pose a simple hermeneutical question such as, Does the term "Prajñāpāramitā" (Perfection of Wisdom) really refer to the same thing in all Mahāyāna texts, or did different authors have different ideas about it? Or, more poignantly, what shall we do with all those Mahāyāna texts that are poorly written and chaotic, even as they claim to be engendered with ultimate wisdom, which they promise to dispense? Does the song remain the same when the musicians can't play? But even this music analogy assigns too much fixity to the referent of the term "Prajñāpāramitā" since it suggests some kind of recognizable perimeter around the song, a perimeter that might not be determinable for most Buddhist terms. The problem here hinges on whether one is willing to accept a hermeneutical structure in which meaning relies on other meanings (a kind of Saussurian or Lacanian notion of an infinite chain of signifiers) or whether one insists that signification leave the realm of the signifiers to jump into that completely other space where there is a pure referent, that is, meaning, free from the presentation and reception of meaning, and the matrixes that allow that to happen.

ing patriarchy, we first have to consider that Buddhist patriarchy and "home-style" or "domestic" patriarchy might have a lot in common. Moreover, it is worth considering that despite being separated by the wall of monastic regulations, monastic and domestic patriarchy can be seen as a father-son pair themselves, with the home-style version serving as the fatherly template from which the monastic took form. In fact, I suspect that not only did the home-style version of patriarchy set up a template that migrated forth into the realm of Buddhist thinking and writing, but that this template has a peculiar tendency to keep migrating away, ironically, from the families that it creates—a kind of restless metastasis of patriarchy.[14]

Thus, arguably, successful patriarchy is always a risk to itself, for once it is effectively installed as a model for reproduction, its very logic of transcendence and detachment has a tendency to turn on itself to create an antagonistic form of itself on another level. This struggle between levels of patriarchy is clearly visible in the biographies of the Buddha: the authors of these biographies need the Buddha to be the son of his father, Śuddhodhana, and a member of the Śākya clan, yet this cannot get in the way of his transcendental sonship produced through a higher form of paternal predecessors defined either as the six or twenty-four preceding buddhas.[15]

This model of self-overcoming patriarchy fits the evidence in early forms of Buddhist patriarchy, but it also seems to be discernible in patterns of Mahāyāna rhetoric, which, when it appears several hundred years after the founding of Buddhism, often replays that home-to-Buddhism jump by doing to Buddhism what Buddhism did to the family. Thus it seems that patriarchy does to itself what it does to a community or society in general: as it creates sameness and difference on one level with a theory of patriarchal presence, it sets up a tendency for this vision of sameness and difference to jump its tracks and take that level of functioning patriarchy as something that can be overcome with yet a higher form. And yet, oddly enough,

14. For a fuller discussion of this "migration" of patriarchy, see my "Homestyle Vinaya and Docile Boys in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7, no. 1 (spring 1999): 5–50; and my "Buddhism," in *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions,* ed. Don S. Browning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

15. For early examples of this tension between dual patriarchs, see the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* and the *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta* (both in the *Dīgha Nikāya*), or the apparently later biographies in the *Buddhavaṃsa,* the *Mahāvastu,* or the *Buddhacarita.* The fuller biographical accounts, such as in the *Mahāvastu* or the *Buddhacarita,* give the distinct impression that the Buddha fathered himself and was not the issue of his earthly father, thereby rendering redundant, at least logically, his apparent paternity via Śuddhodana. For a useful synopsis of the two early buddha-lineages and helpful references, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 19–22. For an important early discussion of the Buddha's biography, see Frank E. Reynolds, "The Many Lives of Buddha," in *The Biographical Process,* ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), pp. 37–61.

this metastasis of patriarchy *only* works when the newer form denies its patriarchal relationship to its template: the monastery can only look legitimate when it both replicates its at-home template and asserts its independence from that template. It is in this complicated dyad of doubling and disavowal that Buddhist patriarchy can be seen as the unrecognized son of a home-style version of patriarchy. The problem is that this newer form of patriarchy needs its defining template even though admitting such a derivative relationship would ruin its claims to having been "fathered" by a higher form of patriarchy—the track of buddhas. Or put otherwise, admitting its real historical relationship to antecedent patriarchal theories would ruin its chance to create the image of a perfect patriarch.

As I will argue in the sequel to this book, this cycle of overcoming what had been "the father" with a new system of fathers continued as Chan seems then to have done to Indic forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism what Mahāyāna Buddhism had done to traditional Buddhism. In short, though this may at first seem like an unlikely way to structure a history of Buddhist rhetoric, there are good reasons for seeing in Buddhist polemics this cycle in which patriarchal family structures, once established at one level to govern identity, authority, and inheritance, tend to be renounced and overcome by a "higher" form that then, too, is susceptible to the ongoing rarefaction of identity. Of course, this is not how we have been thinking about Buddhist rhetoric, but I think the evidence will suggest that this is a fruitful avenue.

Key to catching a glimpse of this pattern of the reproduction of models of patriarchal reproduction via cannibalistic consumption of just those models is appreciation for the way that patriarchy, in general, is established through a mode of negation. Speaking in general, negation figures at the core of patriarchal claims that insist that a duplicated form of patriarchal sameness can only be installed in the son once some other mode of identity has been erased. For instance, in the "at home" version of constructing identity, patriarchy moves forward from father to son by negating images of difference deriving from the mother and any other nonpatriarchal identity that might have hitherto accrued to the boy. In this sequence, father-as-patriarch is imagined to be in charge of dispensing a singular, invisible, and transcendent Something that he lodges in his son-to-be through rituals and narratives that construct and commemorate that sameness, and which is then evidenced in clan, caste, and surname legitimacy.[16]

In effecting this "mystical" injection of patriarchal sameness in the son, the mother, who is obviously located outside the patriline, must be completely negated as a place of origin for the boy in order for the father to

16. For an interesting and rich discussion of this phenomenon, see Nancy Jay's *Throughout Our Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

reconstitute his pristine patriarchal identity in the son. Thus, in making this mystical jump from father to son, over or through the mother, patriarchal identity replicates itself by striking out difference in the son by asserting the son's sameness with the father, despite the son's obvious origin in the mother and his obvious difference as a being other than the father.[17] Hence patriarchy claims to have the power to install male identity first by "executing" or obliterating the maternal element (i.e., purifying the son of his nonpaternal past) and then by filling it in with the preserved essence of the patriline.[18]

Regardless of how we metaphorize the logic at work in assigning patriarchal identity, and it likely is somewhat different in different settings, it might be best for the moment simply to rephrase what I briefly pointed out above: *what is actually transmitted between father and son is faith in the very discourse that explains how real identity is passed from father to son, along with a disciplined attitude toward transmitting that theory of transmission.* Thus patriarchal transmission only succeeds when the new generation first establishes its identity through an appeal to sameness with the prior generation and then seeks to pass this identity forward, through a mother-to-be-removed, so that the sameness will again emerge when the next generation also identifies itself by repeating the gesture of appealing to the presumed sameness that predated it, and so on. Looked at slightly differently, patriarchal reproduction occurs

17. Here I am developing ideas that Jacques Lacan put forward, in his usual turgid prose, regarding paternity and metaphor: "So, it is between the signifier in the form of the proper name of a man and the signifier that metaphorically abolishes him that the poetic spark is produced, and it is in this case all the more effective in realizing the signification of paternity in that it reproduces the mythical even in terms of which Freud reconstructed the progress, in the unconsciousness of all men, of the paternal mystery." "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 158.

In an earlier passage he argues that metaphor "flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonym) connexion with the rest of the chain" (p. 157). I believe Lacan is trying to argue that the notion of the father is just like metaphor insofar as signification jumps between two parties, magically entering both of them but only remaining significant in their mutual juxtaposition. Figuring out how Buddhist texts work to jump just such a spark of paternity between father-text and reading-subject is the primary question for the chapters that follow.

18. Both Buddhist and Brahmanic sources speak of reproducing the son sometime after he was born. In Brahmanism, this might include a washing, or a shaving of the head, or a formal introduction to family gods, or a sacred rite explicitly designed to rebirth him, an event marked with such visible elements as the sacred thread of the twice-born caste. In either case, though, what is especially tricky to theorize is how the negation of the son's nonpatriarchal origin works: does that negation of the son's temporary origin in the mother create a hole with a perimeter that needs to be filled by paternal content, or does that negation open up a space "behind" the boy that needs to be completed with material from the "higher" patriarchal plane?

when the transmission of the *theory* of transmitted content is taken as proof of the transmitted content. This is, of course, just another way of saying that as the narrative of transmitted content goes bumping down the generations, one overlooks the role of the narrative and instead imagines a Real content bumping down the generations too.[19]

This perspective on how the structure of patriarchal discourse moves forward in time also sheds light on the processes by which one patriarchal lineage structure is overwritten by a "higher" lineage. Patriarchy, as I have sketched it here, appears as a metastasizing discourse that jumps over something to make more of itself in new subjects by causing them to perform just this "jumping over" when they in turn reproduce. However, this style of reproduction is predicated on an act of erasure that can be directed to mothers just as well as it can be to fathers, provided, of course, there are higher fathers to whom one can appeal for that patrilineal sameness that will jump over apparent difference and distance.

Supposing this unstable agent in patriarchy that moves both vertically (in time) and horizontally (in social space) is particularly useful when these latter, and supposedly more refined, forms of patriarchy, such as Buddhist patriarchy, turn on themselves to again make more versions of patriarchy, setting up lineages within lineages, with each new form cutting itself free of an older matrix, claiming to be "higher" and yet more "fundamental" than its predecessor. Thus patriarchy's power to assert sameness in difference, that element of transtemporality in the very act of reproduction, makes it a particularly likely choice for reshaping public and jural identities because it can be inscribed in ever more general systems of signification.[20]

19. One could extend these comments to produce interesting commentary on the popular Zen expression that in Zen one doesn't focus on the finger-pointing-at-the-moon but the moon itself. In this parable, the pair signifier and signified (finger and moon) are themselves made into a signifying metaphor in which the "renunciation" of Buddhism is urged in order to find some unconstructed truth beyond tradition, a truth as natural and prelinguistic as the moon. Thus tradition replicates itself by passing on faith in the idea that tradition is to be overcome in favor of that truth that supposedly supports tradition. Obviously, in this trope the finger-pointing-at-the-moon-of-truth is yet another finger; yet insofar as it can avoid that acknowledgment it will remain the organizing trope that effectively constitutes that which is passed down from father to son in the lineage. Thus transmission is only effected when all agree on taking literally the metaphor about how signifiers of truth are to be discarded in favor of truth.

20. Recently Jonathan S. Walters has drawn connections between the universalism of Aśokan policies and the emergence of the Buddha's fuller cosmic lineage, a lineage that seems to have been designed to include, ultimately, all those who faithfully gathered at the widely dispersed sites of public worship established around his relics. For his interesting argument see, "Stūpa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia,* ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 160–94.

Though these issues regarding Buddhist patriarchy are abstract, somewhat counterintuitive, and admittedly distant from previous issues in Buddhist studies, still I think they offer a workable entry into the question of form and content in Mahāyāna discourse that is useful for the chapters that follow. Furthermore, once we position a discussion of Buddhist patriarchy in this manner, we are in better shape to ask whether or not Buddhist renunciation and patriarchy, though apparently contradictory, might not have some common ancestor. Besides the obvious fact that you need to have family in order to renounce the family, it is worth noting that both forms of patriarchy on either side of the monastic wall produce identity through cutting the subject away from one matrix and then installing that purified subject in a kind of formal order that claims to be transtemporal, and less particular. In the lay patriarchal family, the son is inserted into a long chain of reproductive ancestors and cut away from his mother and any matriarchal lines of descent, as well as his own "native" identity. Similarly, in the Buddhist monastic family, the initiate is cut away from his natal patriarchy and installed as a son of the Buddha in the family *(sangha)* of the Buddhist institution with its claims to being the living repository of ahistorical truths that have been discovered and transmitted by numberless buddhas in the past.[21]

Thus, arguably, Buddhism, as the very leaving of the patriarchal family, appears in part as a reflection of the logic inherent *in* the patriarchal family since Buddhism seems to do to familial patriarchy what patriarchy does to the mother and her family: it negates an obvious origin and installs the subject in a higher chain of subjectivity and legality. And, if we see it this way, just as the spark of the father jumps over the gap between generations to lodge itself in the son, so, too, does patriarchy jump from the realm of the physically reproductive family into the religious spheres of Buddhist institutions and identity. In both zones, a discourse is formed to explain why apparent reproduction is not the final word on the identity and responsibilities of the subject. Later, in the much-contested struggles over truth, inheritance, and legitimacy in the Buddhist tradition, it is not too far-fetched to speculate that Buddhist polemicists returned to this fundamental gesture in their efforts to create and sustain immaculate

21. There are several elements that mark ordination as a kind of second birth, but it is particularly significant that hierarchy was established within the Buddhist order through a system of seniority that was defined by one's length of time in the order. This implies that joining the family of Buddhist renunciants is a kind of birth that then installs one in a certain pecking order based on "birth order." That this hierarchy is actually patriarchal is underwritten by the way that the Buddha, as shown in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta,* institutes this system of seniority on the day he dies, clearly setting it up to serve in place of his guiding fatherly role; see Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 269–70.

identities of transcendental sameness in the face of difference, dispersal, and dissension.

In sum, it is just this kind of discourse that insists on that invisible reality behind the given, a presence that supposedly produces higher identity and which persists through time, difference, and language, that is the enduring topic of this book.

2

Who's Your Daddy Now?

Reissued Paternity in the Lotus Sūtra

Once you've determined the right plot, plot is over.
PETER BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*

SETTING THE STAGE

One of the most striking things about the *Lotus Sūtra* is its sophisticated use of father-son motifs to explain its own identity and then to insert itself as the defining element in creating a new identity for the reader and his relationship to the Buddhist tradition.[1] The brilliance of the text lies in the way that it is designed as a pivot that achieves its own legitimation by offering legitimacy to the reader. Thus there is a formal mimesis between the text and the reader, both of whom are given their fathers in the reading event, and it is precisely by arranging that double fathering that the text effects its most basic seduction. That is, the text is designed to enact an amazing exchange: give me the paternal right to give you, the reader, your proper paternity. More exactly, the *Lotus Sūtra* attempts to draw the reader into accepting its redefinition of Buddhism by claiming that it, as text, was the final product of a perfect patriline of twenty thousand buddhas and that this heritage allows the text to then offer the reader entrance into that patriline, once the reader assents to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s genealogical claim to be of that lineage.

In addition to this impressive narrative architecture, and its likely influence on other early sūtras, the *Lotus Sūtra* warrants special attention for displaying a complex relationship to earlier forms of Buddhism. Of particular interest is the way the *Lotus Sūtra* defined this newly created Mahāyāna sonship as a kind of rebirth out of a previously established father-son identity that had already explained Buddhist identity as a kind of sonship to the

1. I've chosen this campy title for this chapter to echo the *Lotus Sūtra*'s arrogance in calling all readers sons. An early version of this chapter was presented at Leiden University in May 1999.

Buddha.[2] Standing back from this play of paternity, it seems that the *Lotus Sūtra* created the image of a hyper-Buddhist family that is formed by explicitly renouncing a previously established paternal Buddhist family, even as it borrowed many of its defining elements and logics.

Thus, throughout these narratives of conversion there is something like a ritual structure for dying to one identity in order to adopt a new one, though there is no ritual format or institutional setting provided to support this shift in Buddhist identity. Hence the text attempts to effect what Pierre Bourdieu would call "rites of institution," even though there is no institution mentioned other than the reading moment itself and no external props, save for the physical presence of the text as book.[3] This lack of external or institutional support explains many of the narrative's contortions as it attempts to legitimize itself from within itself in order to place itself at the center of a newly defined form of Buddhism that offered itself as the gateway to gaining a revamped form of Buddhist identity.[4]

In organizing such a reading of the *Lotus Sūtra,* I need to emphasize that I am assuming that the text, or at least the chapters that I analyze closely here, were composed as an integrated plot with a governing set of principles dedicated to achieving goals that remain fairly constant over the arc of the narrative. In other words, I am assuming that at least a part of the *Lotus Sūtra* has a plot and that we can, with care and attention, begin to understand its construction and the deeper set of authorial strategies that were relied on in creating a reading experience. If we do not adopt this kind of "reading for the plot" approach, then we have to fall back on one of three options. The first is that we could simply consider that the text emerged as an unwished-for grab bag of unrelated narrative snippets, pasted together without a governing intent or a steady editorial notion of the work to be accomplished by the very act of compilation. This option is altogether unsatisfying

2. For an overview of sources that employ the term "son of the Buddha," see the article "Busshi" in *Hōbōgirin: Dictionaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises,* vol. 1 (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1927), pp. 171–74. For an interesting discussion of the problems of inclusion and differentiation that work around this particular nomenclature in non-Mahāyāna sources, see Gregory Schopen, "Monks and the Relic Cult in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta,*" in *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1991), pp. 196–98. More recently, Richard Cohen has approached similar issues surrounding paternal terminology in Indian Buddhism; see his "Kinsmen of the Son: Śākyabhikṣus and the Institutionalization of the Bodhisattva Ideal," *History of Religions* 40, no. 1 (August 2000): 1–31.

3. For Bourdieu's insightful essay "Rites of Instititution," which reworks some of Arnold Van Gennep's ideas, see his *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 117–26.

4. For an excellent discussion on creating the appearance of closure and gestalt in a reading, see Samuel Weber's *Institution and Interpretation: Expanded Version* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), esp. "Caught in the Act of Reading," pp. 180–206.

since the text clearly shows authorial or editorial intention. The second option is the religious one that assumes that the narrative, in all its bits and pieces, reflects real events and thus cannot be read for a plot since it simply is what happened. In this view the text as text and the author as inventor completely disappear into the Real that the text creates for itself. The third option is trickier and I think represents the standard choice in Buddhist studies: the text has something of plot, but it is not the result of authorial ingenuity but instead reflects, in some distorted manner, a summation of the will and wishes of an early Mahāyāna community who wanted to create this document as a quilting point for their beliefs and practices.

As for this third possibility, on reflection this image of "writing by committee" is problematic and particularly so once we see how much seduction and deception are at work in the narrative. The assumption that the text is a kind of platform statement of the earnest Mahāyāna community in no way matches the subtle seductions that the text achieves precisely by working on the reader without the reader ever realizing these machinations. Moreover, it is altogether obvious that the *Lotus Sūtra* is about *making* religious community rather than reflecting it in some Durkheimian manner. In short, I cannot see any way to interpret literary seduction, especially at this level of intricacy, other than via authorial intention. Too, by the final chapters of this book, I will have provided solid evidence that the *Lotus Sūtra* and other sūtras from this period belong to a literary culture of authors who, themselves, read each other's work *for the plot* and borrowed and manipulated plotting techniques in the knowledge of how and why certain plot configurations were effective. Thus, though it is one of the heftier bugbears in the field of religious studies, we need not be afraid to imagine the role of the clever and complicated authors of religious content who gained their talents by reading tradition and seeing how it worked and then going on to create new and more inventive forms of tradition precisely because they had, in some measure, learned how tradition could be reworked.

Given my intention to read for the plot, I treat only the first four chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* in detail since they represent an integrated narrative that establishes the platform, authority, and agenda of the text and arguably belong to the oldest strata in the text.[5] Actually, if we follow the theme of the Buddha converting old-school monks, and prophesying their future buddhahood, there is a measure of coherency and focus that continues through chapter 9, though even in these chapters it seems clear that mate-

5. Since I am ultimately interested in its effects in China, I will be reading from Kumārajīva's popular translation done in 406; for a modern edited version of this text see the *Taishō* text, T.9.1 ff. For a detailed discussion of the various recensions of the *Lotus Sūtra,* see Michael Pye's *Skilful Means* (London: Duckworth, 1978). Though I disagree with Pye's assessment of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative and agenda, his account of the historical development of the text is useful.

rial from the first four chapters is replayed and reworked. This sequence of conversions from old-style Buddhism seems to close out in chapter 10, which is clearly designed to cap the discussion as it is devoted to explaining rules for receiving, upholding, and worshiping the text as book. Subsequent chapters clearly break with the structure, orientation, and dramatis personae of the earlier chapters, and even advertise themselves as suitable for circulation separate from the text, as chapter 23 on the Medicine King Bodhisattva does. And yet, though it is clear that much of what constitutes the later chapters has been added on, it is hard, simply on formal grounds, to determine what might or might not have been included in the earliest version of the text. For the moment, I am leaving aside arguments about what among the later chapters ought to be counted as part of the earliest narrative.

THE NARRATIVE ABOUT THE NARRATIVE

The first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* follows two separate but related narrative sequences, both of which are presented in a prose and verse pair. The first sequence establishes the Buddha Śākyamuni's teaching moment by recounting a discussion between Mañjuśrī (the bodhisattva of wisdom) and Maitreya (the coming buddha, according to traditional Buddhism), who are supposedly at Rājagṛha in northeastern India attending this teaching. In this discussion Maitreya, as a kind of spokesperson for the gathered host of expectant beings, expresses his doubts and uneasiness about a miraculous display of light produced from the Buddha's forehead, a miracle in which the entire audience suddenly saw "eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern direction."[6] Perhaps even more shocking to the audience is that this light caused them to see beings in all levels of the cosmos: "From this world one could see the living beings in the six paths of existence in all of those other lands."[7] Thus at this opening moment in the narrative the internal audience was inexplicably inducted into a cosmic view that is usually the special purview of buddhas who see all beings in the six realms, with the only difference being that this view was restricted to the eastern quadrant of the universe whereas a buddha's would be omnidirectional.[8]

The second sequence in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s opening chapter is told in flash-

6. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 6 (hereafter cited as Watson); T.9.2b.17 ff.

7. Watson, p. 6; T.9.2b.17 ff. A very similar kind of light, with similar effects, including allowing beings to recognize each other throughout the cosmos, is mentioned in the Mahāpadāna Sutta. See Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 203. Working from such a light miracle is standard in many early Mahāyāna sūtras and will reappear in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* treated in chapter 5.

8. Watson, p. 6; T.9.2b.17 ff.

back mode by Mañjuśrī as he reveals how this light miracle is but part A of a standard A to B pattern, with B being the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, from the start, narrative action comes with a kind of commentary that fixes the legitimacy of narrative action by anchoring it in a noncontingent pattern of repetition. Or better, even in this briefest of narrative action, the narrative is already bending back on itself to explain that the mode of the narrative follows an even deeper narrative and thus should not be seen as manufactured. As Mañjuśrī says, "Now when I see this auspicious portent [the light miracle], it is no different from what I saw before. Therefore I suppose that now the Tathāgata is about to preach the Mahāyāna Sūtra called the Lotus of the Wonderful Law, a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the buddhas."[9] Evidently, from the outset the author wants the reader to accept the idea that the narrative is both of cosmic proportions and completely free of authorial manipulation, since the events that make up the narrative are explained as nothing but a kind of eternal return. I explore more thoroughly the form and logic of the light miracle below, in particular its metonymic relationship to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s overall project of publicly displaying truth, but first let us consider how these initial self-referencing structures work to explain the text's origins.

In the wake of this initial and apparently undeserved overexposure to truth, Maitreya wonders about the cause of this spectacular event, an event that he seems to interpret as excessive and perhaps, given his subsequent search for its justifying causes, potentially illegitimate. To quell his unease, he seeks out a reliable narrator in the figure of Mañjuśrī who can, with a much greater historical overview, explain the causality and legitimacy of this opening event. To orchestrate this shift in Maitreya's dependence from the Buddha to Mañjuśrī, the narrative explains that after having seen the light miracle, Maitreya discovers that he cannot ask the Buddha directly what this vision means because he sees that the Buddha is in a meditative *samādhi* and thus unavailable.[10] Thus, though the vision originates in the body of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the narrative pushes Maitreya away from the Buddha and sends him off on a quest for origins that will reveal a new and "deeper" spokesperson for tradition.

Equally clear in this opening scene, Maitreya, as Śākyamuni's traditional heir apparent, is dislocated from standard tracks of legitimacy and information. For the moment, Maitreya cannot get answers from Śākyamuni, who normally would have been expected to play just this role of informing his spiritual descendant about truth and authenticity. Instead, Maitreya is led unwittingly to uncover a genealogy for this initial truth-event that will subsume Śākyamuni in a much grander plot and completely overturn tra-

9. Watson, p. 17; T.9.4b.16.
10. Watson, p. 6; T.9.2b.26.

ditional Buddhism's notions of genealogical truth. Even more shocking, this search for the genealogy of the light miracle will result in Maitreya coming to reconceptualize his own Buddhist sonship in a manner completely at odds with tradition's explanation of his simple inheritance from Śākyamuni. In noting these shifts, we are witnessing but one of the many moments when the narrative presents the "real" history of Buddhism on a far more sublime plane than that normally associated with the figure of Śākyamuni.

To sum up, here at the outset the narrative presents action (the light miracle), describes its effect on the audience in the narrative, and then produces an internal narrator who will assess the import of these "historical" events at Rājagṛha by furnishing Maitreya and, of course, the reader with the unseen "deep history" of this event. Thus the narrative has begun its storytelling by detouring into explaining why this storytelling needs another story behind it.[11] More poignantly, the narrative begins by demonstrating that the truth of Buddhism is to be retold through a plotline that no longer emerges from Śākyamuni and moreover presents information about buddhahood that is shocking even to his expected heir—Maitreya.[12]

The structure of this search for the legitimacy of the light miracle implies that the problem of the light miracle is essentially the same problem that the *Lotus Sūtra* faces. Suggestive of this homology between the narrative and the first action that it narrates is that both are excessive, inexplicable visions on to truth that characters in the narrative are not ready to receive. More topically, both "events" seek to reveal Buddhism from a higher perspective in which the observer suddenly contemplates Buddhist "history" from a buddha's-eye view but also sees slightly more than a buddha does. In fact, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, the characters in the narrative are going to "see," just as in this light miracle, buddhas living and dying, as they reveal the paths of Buddhism that the *Lotus Sūtra* is intent on creating.

These parallels are noteworthy, but there is one more piece of evidence that is quite convincing for reading the light miracle as a metonym for the entire narrative. To wit, the narrative's resolution of the light miracle's

11. One fun example of a similar technique can be found in the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,* an album that narrates its origins in the introductory song by the same title and in the reprise, both pieces explaining the supposed history of the band and how the night is going to go, or has gone. Of course, this narration of the faux live event appears as both the content of that event and the effect of the carefully produced studio album.

12. In the collection of essays dedicated to the figure of Maitreya in *Maitreya, the Future Buddha,* ed. Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), this problem of Mahāyāna authors reconstructing Maitreya's legitimacy did not receive any attention, though it clearly figures prominently in the *Lotus Sūtra* narrative and again in the *Vimalakīrti.* Nonetheless, Jan Nattier's essay in that collection does note that in Mahāyāna texts Maitreya often is given a "position of clear subordination to other members of the Buddhist pantheon" (p. 35).

genealogy actually turns into an account of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s genealogy, with the two inextricably linked. Hence establishing the origin and meaning of the light miracle resolves the problem of the entire narrative because the narrative explains that the two are forever linked in a serial sequence. Given Mañjuśrī's confidence regarding the certainty of this A-to-B sequence between the light miracle and the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra,* once the narrative explains the legitimacy of A (the light miracle), it has, according to the rules it has generated for itself, naturally explained its own legitimacy. The deeper level of ingenuity here is that the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative brilliantly constructs the light miracle as something like a condensed version of itself, in visual form, which it then justifies with a history and a genealogy, even as all that narrative justification supplied for the light miracle ends up justifying the narrative itself.

Ironically, then, as the *Lotus Sūtra* works to legitimize this first part of itself it appears to be moving in reverse—filling in the past of the present—even when in fact this movement in reverse is the driving impetus for the forward movement of the narrative. Consequently, by opening with a legitimacy problem that is both other to it and yet intimately related to it, the narrative appears in a space that seems, superficially, to legitimize an event external to itself (the light miracle) even as the project of legitimizing that event is "internal" to itself and intimately involved with its own emergence from a source of legitimacy. In metaphoric terms, the narrative has justified itself as son by proving the legitimacy of its "father"—the light miracle—a gesture that in narrative form allows for the search for legitimacy to look much less self-serving.

Read in this manner, the opening chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* is a very clever mixture of dialogue and narrative. Though most Buddhist discourses, as they have come down to us, begin with a narrative account of where the Buddha's teaching took place and who was in attendance, the *Lotus Sūtra* seems unusual in developing that "preaction" portion of itself and folding that prenarrative narrative into itself such that the discussion of its various levels of historicity and legitimacy expands to become itself. That is, for the *Lotus Sūtra,* the stage-setting introduction is not a clearly demarcated part of the text, and instead of simply presenting the various events that prepare for the Buddha's discourse, this preaction space is extensively expanded to become the text so that the text is largely about the text, with the added caveat that this narrative about the narrative is designed to make "the narrative" seem timeless and always-already achieved. Thus in an impossible kind of Escher hand-drawing-hand situation, the narrative wants to be timeless and uncreated, even as it needs historical events and agents to verify its timelessness, with the added twist that these events and agents are then bathed in the timelessness that they just helped to create.

Though the following chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra* will locate the Buddha in historical "time" and have him begin to discourse, it turns out that he is not actually giving the *Lotus Sūtra.* Instead, he too is talking *about it* from an external point of view, just as these initial characters are, even as all this discourse about the *Lotus Sūtra* is nothing but the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus the introduction has created a rich and complex narrative space that can refer to itself and trace down its antecedents, even as these "historical" facts about its presentation on this particular day at Rājagṛha, along with the statements about its much deeper history, become the body of the text and absorb the veracity that they have created.

To begin to sort out the confusion caused by rhetoric taking itself to be both transtemporal and historical, I suggest that we consider the parallel problem in the statement "This sentence is true." In both the sentence and the *Lotus Sūtra,* form and content are completely self-referential through a confusion of levels. In the sentence "This sentence is true," the sentence is presented twice. First, it is simply the unnamed articulation that begins with "This" and ends with a period. Second, it also appears in that declarative statement as a named item, "This sentence," which then is given the attribute of being true. The motor that makes the sentence tautological is that the predicate of truthfulness given to the subject, "This sentence," naturally jumps levels to land on the full sentence that contains that subject and predicate. Once this jump between the full sentence as matrix for the naming event and its name that gains the attribute of truthfulness in the sentence has been made, the sentence is positioned to both articulate its judgment of itself and actually be that judgment.

While sorting this out with a sentence is vexing enough, the complexity jumps tenfold in the *Lotus Sūtra:* in giving a self-reflexive account of its veracity the narrative creates a number of speaking characters that initially appear external to the narrative, even though they of course only exist in the narrative to serve its basic agenda of appearing as truthful and unconstructed. Thus it is as though "This sentence is true" has been expanded to "This discourse is true" with the inclusion of any number of spokespersons who vouch for the discourse by name, give their historical rights for saying so, and explain the effects this discourse has had in the past.

In modern terms, this is basically the format of an infomercial in which the supposedly objective commentators explain the product and yet remain forever controlled by the overall agenda of the thirty-minute sales pitch and the terms of their contracts that define their performance in the infomercial. The twist is that with the *Lotus Sūtra,* the product being offered in the infomercial is the infomercial itself, presumably in some externalized form, perhaps as a video. Put in this light, we are close to my comments on the parallels between these sūtras and chain letters, as explored in chapter 1.

TRUTH IN REPETITION

Structuring the first chapter around the figure of Maitreya as a doubting Thomas seeking the causes of this initial "action" (the light miracle) makes absolutely clear that from the beginning the narrative is constructed around the assumption that truth—even as direct as seeing the entire eastern quadrant of the universe through the auspices of a present buddha—needs a legitimizing history to be accepted and trusted. Thus the text's first gesture is to produce a recipient of truth intent on recovering the history of just that truth-event which is currently in front of him and yet remains disturbing without a sanctioning history. To resolve the narrative's self-created anxiety, Mañjuśrī is introduced to produce a narrative for the doubting Maitreya, the wider audience, and the reader, a narrative that recounts a distant past time, "a time that was an immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable number of uncountable aeons in the past,"[13] all in order to reveal the repeating template that Mañjuśrī himself is relying on to explain the present.

Naturally, for this double plotting to work, the narrative has to step, after a fashion, outside of itself to create a view of itself from "above." To erect this particularly privileged platform of observation, the text has Maitreya attribute to Mañjuśrī the power to perceive a kind of deep history, powers that Maitreya, with his limited view, could never know or verify. This deep history of the repeating teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra,* like the initial vision granted to Maitreya and the audience, contains within it the life and death of buddhas, and this raises some fundamental questions. In particular, now the narrative explaining truth is distinctively larger than the truth-beings who used to be in charge of truth narratives—the buddhas—a position that the text is clearly seeking to gain for itself.

The narrative's lèse-majesté against the primacy of the buddhas is only partially muted by emphasizing Mañjuśrī's reliability as a narrator and giving him the identity of a son of the buddha, or rather the son of a "dharma king," which is a standard epithet for a buddha. As Maitreya puts it, "This Mañjuśrī, son of a Dharma King [a buddha], has already personally attended and given offerings to immeasurable numbers of buddhas in the past; surely he must *have seen* these rare signs. I will now question him."[14] Thus the narrative has cleverly constructed opening action, a response, and a search for legitimacy, a search that nonetheless already has encoded legitimacy in itself

13. Watson, p. 14, with slight revisions; T9.3c.17.

14. T.9.2b.29; Watson, p. 6, with revisions; in particular, Watson reads my "have seen" as "see," which I don't think makes sense given the context. Maitreya is looking to Mañjuśrī for an explanation of this current event based on Mañjuśrī's past experience, amply recounted in the preceding sentence, and thus it is Mañjuśrī's ableness as a recounter of the past that matters to Maitreya.

via the figure of Mañjuśrī who the narrative deftly gives a "prenarrative" legitimacy as a trustworthy narrator and "son of a Dharma King."

It is important to note here that Mañjuśrī is the only figure whose legitimacy is not a pressing issue in the text. Leaving aside for the moment the complication of having the story of Buddhism's fundamental patriline told from a kind of *Über-son's* point of view, it is clear that the narrative has created a narrator who has solved the problem that the text is seeking to solve for itself—legitimate origins. Actually, the narrative soon will explain Mañjuśrī's identity as one completely intertwined with the history of the *Lotus Sūtra,* and confirmed thereby, but this confirmation *from* the *Lotus Sūtra* will only come after Mañjuśrī has confirmed the *Lotus Sūtra.* I explore Mañjuśrī's complex identity below, but for the moment we can be sure that by narrating its own narrative in this way, the question of the origins of the *Lotus Sūtra* is displaced backward in time to some incredibly distant time zone that seems too distant and unconstructed to be doubted—as though the narrative gains legitimacy by pushing its origins as far away as possible from its current articulation.

Something else is won by pushing the origins of the narrative back in time. The text is effectively claiming that no contemporary figure could know of its origins. Maitreya, traditionally known to be the next buddha, is shown unable to interpret the light miracle that announces the beginning sequence of a *Lotus Sūtra* teaching. Clearly, then, lack of knowledge about this sūtra's origins has now been sanctified by showing that traditionally respected figures in the know, such as Maitreya, also lack this information. Thus the reader is being gently encouraged to have every confidence that just as tradition, symbolized in the figure of Maitreya, needs the coming education, so too does the reader. Of course, this step is but the first in the longer sequence of relegitimizing all these Buddhist figures from Maitreya down to the reading subject, a process that will be defined strictly in terms of accepting as true the narrative's narrative of itself.

Without getting too tangled up in this self-referentiality, let me just say that the narrative works by splitting itself into narrating subject (Mañjuśrī) and textual object (the *Lotus Sūtra*) in order that the narrative about the text-as-object can bestow legitimacy on itself as object, only to then have that very narrator (Mañjuśrī) recuperate that legitimacy through a lack of clarity regarding these two "sides" of the text. In more prosaic terms, this self-referential structure is not too different from the guy on the next barstool saying, "The thing about me is I always tell the truth." Though there appears to be a narrator-historian external to the subject and his discourse, in fact this narrator-historian is inseparable from the subject and his discourse. Switching to the example of human self-justification is particularly useful because in the *Lotus Sūtra,* both text and reader get legitimized, that is, fathered, when they learn to "talk" just like this.

At this moment in the text, as the text describes this age-old A-to-B template that it has created to explain its present articulation, we confront all sorts of interesting differences between these supposedly parallel enactments of A to B. For one, in describing the distant past, the light miracle appears to have produced practically no doubt and flowed directly into B, the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Except for one line mentioning that the audience at the previous teaching "wished to know the causes and conditions that had occasioned that light,"[15] part A went to part B without any hitch and, more important, without any need to discuss the A-to-B progression as Maitreya and Mañjuśrī are currently doing. While this one line implies that the author wanted to demonstrate the steady sameness of this repetitive A-to-B pattern, it is also true that the narration of this primal A-to-B progression is quite different from the current one, which has turned into such a lengthy discussion of historical precedents in a way that its precedent could not have.

Obviously, if that initial A-to-B progression had had such a discussion of origins, it too would have had to find a securing precedent to overcome its uncertainty: clearly the template cannot need a template or we would have just opened up a jar of bad infinity. In other words, the search for origins needs to find a generative template, but there will never be a direct correspondence between these two moments, since the origin cannot be looking for origins or the project falls apart. And here the skills of the author are more than ever evident: a narrative that weaves in and out of time zones to narrate its own delivery, *in the present and in the past,* manages to cloak the fact that in establishing these tracks of its legitimacy, it still is itself, forever spinning around the phrase "the thing about me," even if the referent of this statement can never be found to be stable, singular, or selfsame.

To sum up these points, from the perspective of the discussants in the narrative we have the following causality established for accepting the narrative's theory of its own origins. If Maitreya accepts Mañjuśrī's narrative that explains the A-to-B sequence, he will have accepted A (the light miracle) as legitimate, because Mañjuśrī can vouch for it, and, likewise, since part of this deeper narrative about the narrative explains the ever predictable movement from A to B, he will also be prepared to accept B (the *Lotus Sūtra*). That is, in accepting the legitimizing genealogy of A, the light miracle, he is bound to accept the *Lotus Sūtra,* since in fact the two come as a kind of father-son pair. Of course, along the way he has accepted Mañjuśrī as a reliable narrator and many other basic assumptions about the universe, such as its cyclical predictability.

What is absolutely key here is that from the reader's point of view, though

15. Watson, p. 15; T.9.4a.22.

"B" means the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s explanation of what should follow the light miracle, in fact, the *Lotus Sūtra* is generating itself just in that space between A and B, with B forever postponed. More exactly, the *Lotus Sūtra* legitimizes its rights to speak truth by creating a truthful speaker who can convince others in the narrative that they all are players in a completely legitimate and predictable plot that has already begun and is securely fastened to a deeper historical plot built of confirming repetitions. Thus, in proving truth through repetition, we readers learn to read the plot by watching Maitreya learn to "read" the plot, and of course, all this learning to read the plot is, on the largest scale, *nothing but the plot.*

THE SŪTRA OF LIMITLESS MEANING

The sophistication of this self-referential narrative is also visible in the author's use of a curious shadow sūtra, the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning (wuliang yi jing).*[16] This sūtra is identified by the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative as a Mahāyāna teaching, and it is mentioned in both the current teaching moment at Rājagṛha and in that distant primal template that Mañjuśrī invokes to explain the present. In both cases, it is explicitly named and placed as a teaching that the Buddha finishes giving right before his light miracle is performed. So, in fact, even before the A-to-B pattern we have a kind of grounding introductory teaching that apparently always accompanies the A-to-B progression. Though Chinese authors in the fifth or sixth century seem to have forged a sūtra to accompany this title, no evidence has been found for such a text in India.[17] What might this otherwise unknown sūtra be doing right here in this most crucial of moments that leads into the A-to-B pattern? Once again, if we approach the *Lotus Sūtra* without thinking about the issue of a text assuming the legitimacy to grant legitimacy, we are not going to be able to ask useful questions about the role of this unusual sūtra.

As an opening hypothesis, I suggest that we interpret this *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* as a needed element in the complex relationship between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the truth-fathers that it is trying to create for itself. The nub of this relationship is a chicken and egg problem: the *Lotus Sūtra* assumes that it needs a truth-father to produce it, yet what truth will a truth-father have to prove his identity as truth-father before the *Lotus Sūtra* exists? This is a particularly delicate problem given that the *Lotus Sūtra* claims to be the site and reservoir of total truth. Put differently, if the *Lotus Sūtra* is the element that

16. Watson, p. 5; T.9.2b.8.

17. Neal Donner and Daniel B. Stevenson note that this is "an apocryphal work produced in China in the mid-fifth century." See Neal Donner and Daniel B. Stevenson, *The Great Calming and Contemplation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), p. 121 n. 136.

creates legitimacy in the patriline of truth, and we will see this logic amply demonstrated, how could it ever have a founding father since that father would need truth but would not as yet have the *Lotus Sūtra* since he was in the process of producing it? If we start in this direction of interpretation there are three details that support reading the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* as a mediating presence between father and patriarchal truth—a perfect, contentless product produced in order to confirm the power and legitimacy of the producer so that he may then produce the *Lotus Sūtra,* the item that is supposed to confirm the legitimacy for all beings.

As for the first detail, the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* is the only other named text in the *Lotus Sūtra* and is part of what the *Lotus Sūtra* explains as an integral part of its predetermined mode of coming into being. Second, the phrase used to describe the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* is identical to the one used to describe the *Lotus Sūtra,* implying a family resemblance, and maybe more. Both texts are referred to with precisely the same phrasing: "a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the buddhas."[18] Given the completely jealous and self-aggrandizing nature of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s rhetoric, this other sūtra cannot be at odds with the *Lotus Sūtra* and in fact probably cannot even be other than the *Lotus Sūtra*—there just cannot be two different and yet equally ultimate sūtras held by buddhas, since the *Lotus Sūtra* asserts that it is the be-all and end-all of Buddhism.

Third, no details or content are ever explained for this mysterious sūtra. One would think that at this crucial moment whatever issued forth would have tremendous value and lasting effect. However, in its past and present "appearance," there is only that one sentence devoted to describing the nature of the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning:* "a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the buddhas." Similarly, there is no mention of the effect that this sūtra has on the audience. Instead, it seems simply to be present as a necessary if inert element in the narrative describing the emergence of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* plays that difficult role of being nearly the same as the *Lotus Sūtra* and yet just different enough to exist in advance of "itself"—a kind of stillborn older brother who proves the legitimate fertility of the father so that that father can then produce the *Lotus Sūtra.*

Relying on the perfunctory presence of the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* suggests that the author is quite aware of the problem of tracing truth-as-an-inherited-item back into the original truth-father. Once truth is made into a patriarchal item, then, like two north poles of a magnet, no direct effort will succeed in returning it to the original father. This is because a truth-father is supposed to have inherited truth, but that truth is only identified as true if it

18. Watson, pp. 15, 16.

comes from a truth-father. In this leapfrog game of truth and paternity, the truth-father has truth but only because he can point to his truth-father, and so on. Thus one can never be found without the other, and yet neither can they be jointly identified within one single founding figure. Instead, once legitimacy is established in this patriarchal form, the content of the lineage can never be stabilized since the presence of either item—paternal truth or the truth-father—inevitably calls for the prior generation's endorsement. The tensions surrounding the impossibility of finding a paternal origin are overcome brilliantly in the *Lotus Sūtra* by creating this shadow sūtra as a kind of empty and completely vapid truth to hold together the truth-fathers before they begin trafficking in the *Lotus Sūtra.*

With these details in view, it is clear that we are reading a rather wily author. No one could doubt that the *Lotus Sūtra,* at least in these early chapters, evinces a high degree of sophistication in establishing the rules according to which it is presenting truth to its audience. Clarifying this level of ingenuity is crucial for judging the likelihood of other narrative ploys in the chapters to come. As in the evaluation of all art, a reading gains strength once it can be shown to belong to a "family" of parallel gestures of equal complexity.

For instance, the ingenuity of doubling the *Lotus Sūtra* in the forever stillborn *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* only comes clear when we pay special attention to the final level of difference between the primal A-to-B template and its current manifestation at Rājagṛha. In Mañjuśrī's explanation in the second part of the opening chapter, we learn that the original template for delivering the *Lotus Sūtra* came into being directly in the wake of the demise of an uncanny and fundamentally unique lineage of twenty thousand buddhas, a lineage that, too, apparently had to die out so that the *Lotus Sūtra* could be born. Thus though the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* seemed to resolve the tension between truth and truth-father, in fact the author chose to push back one step farther to find an even deeper track of paternity to support itself, a track of truth-fathers that will involve truly acrobatic narrative techniques.

In sum, the "birth story" that the *Lotus Sūtra* gives for itself pushes back through several layers of confirming templates of repetition. First, it follows the A-to-B pattern that predictably arrives after the teaching of the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning.* Second, this A-to-B pattern belongs to a long chain of repetitions, which then are traced back to the first A-to-B template. Third, this initial A-to-B template is located at the business end of yet another kind of lineage of repetition—the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas—which dies in just such a way that the templates begin and the *Lotus Sūtra* formally comes into being and into its present articulation, an articulation that of course holds all of these tracks of legitimizing repetition telescoped within itself. Content, then, is, for the moment at least, completely given over to verifying the genealogy of content.

TWENTY THOUSAND BUDDHAS UNDER THE TEXT

The explanation of these twenty thousand buddhas constitutes part 2 of the first chapter and presents a fascinating set of exchanges between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the layers of paternal truth-fathers that it is creating for itself. Here we see a rich display of the author's ability to create truth-fathers whose sole purpose in the narrative is to legitimize the narrative in its efforts to undermine traditional Buddhist lineages. Equally telling, these fathers are also positioned to make that deepest form of legitimacy available to all devoted readers, albeit through the agency of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, in the end, these fathers are poised to refather the reader once he has accepted how they fathered the *Lotus Sūtra*.

In Mañjuśrī's account, as just mentioned, these twenty thousand buddhas are the oldest foundation of legitimacy for the initial light miracle and the *Lotus Sūtra*. Despite the legitimizing role that these fathers play, it is still the case that their presence is produced here to upset older molds of paternal legitimacy. Thus even as Mañjuśrī traces a lineage of causality back to this stupendously grand lineage, he implicitly demotes the speaking Buddha Śākyamuni in a number of ways that will be clear soon enough. Actually, simply by rendering the Buddha Śākyamuni's actions predictable and predetermined in accord with rules for the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the narrative implies that its own rules exceed the authority of buddhas and determine their actions. Thus Mañjuśrī exclaims to the audience in the narrative at Rājagṛha:[19]

> Good men, I suppose that the Buddha, the World Honored One, wishes now to expound the great Law *(da fa),* to rain down the rain of the great Law, to blow the conch of the great Law, to beat the drum of the great Law, to elucidate the meaning of the great Law. Good men, in the past I have seen this auspicious portent among the buddhas. They emitted a beam of light like this and after they expounded the great Law. Therefore, we should know that now, when the present Buddha manifests this light, he will do likewise.

Noteworthy in this passage is the shift from politely speculative remarks in Mañjuśrī's prediction of the coming fulfillment of the template to much more commanding language of causal certainty. Thus, though Mañjuśrī starts off with an "I suppose," he is speaking much more confidently by the end of the passage, claiming, "Therefore we should know . . . he will do likewise." Below, we will have more evidence for interpreting the implications of subjecting the current Buddha, and all buddhas, to the *Lotus Sūtra* and its template, but for now note that though the *Lotus Sūtra* has positioned itself as about to come out of Śākyamuni's mouth, Śākyamuni is

19. Watson, pp. 13–14; T.9.3c.11 ff.

arguably coming out of the matrix of this grand template that the *Lotus Sūtra* has constructed to explain its origins. Thus just as the narrative created the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* to be a functional if empty placeholder, I think we should say something similar about its treatment of Śākyamuni. He has been demoted to a mere mouthpiece for the *Lotus Sūtra,* and a rather late one at that. Or, rather, Śākyamuni has been presented as one who knows the plot and submits to it perfectly, just as the reader should.

To prepare for interpreting the tension over "size" and "scope" in the narrative's assessment of itself vis-à-vis Śākyamuni, we need to pay close attention to the nature of this lineage of twenty thousand buddhas that Mañjuśrī is about to explain. The most striking thing that we learn about this immense and seamless lineage of twenty thousand truth-fathers is that they all have the same surname, Bharadvaja *(Po luo duo),* and the same given name, Sun Moon Bright *(Reyue deng ming).*[20] With no clear explanation of their mode of reproduction, we learn that these buddhas follow after one another in perfect replication: "Then there was another buddha who was also named Sun Moon Bright, and then another buddha also named Sun Moon Bright. There were twenty thousand buddhas like this, all with the same appellation, all named Sun Moon Bright."[21]

As in most accounts of lineages of total sameness, the only really interesting figure is the last buddha, who, in this case, has the misfortune of ending the lineage. Ironically, the demise of the lineage apparently is a consequence of the last buddha actually reproducing a lineage but in the wrong place. Until then, there was perfectly repeated sameness: each buddha simply taught perfectly with no mention of his actual progeny, be it inside or outside of domestic space. Thus the lineage was in its most sublime form in which difference did not exist. Sons were never other than fathers, and each father was none other than his father, as their completely identical names suggest.[22] This perfectly simple duplication of buddhahood and legitimacy ends with a buddha who, unlike his forefathers, "when he had not yet left family life, had eight princely sons."[23] This domestic fertility clearly upsets the normal mode of producing Sun Moon Bright buddhas and sets in motion a fascinating cycle of exchanges between several layers of fathers and sons, even back at this fundamental layer of patriarchy that the *Lotus Sūtra* is constructing for itself.

The first thing to note is the tension between two levels of patriarchy

20. It is interesting to note that the clan name is transliterated into Chinese, whereas the given name is translated for its meaning.

21. Watson, p. 14; T.9.3c.26.

22. Of course, too, there is no mention of the sūtras actually being taught. Instead the narrative gives us generic accounts of their teaching with no interest in locating the *Lotus Sūtra* back in this deepest time zone because this is a story of the birth of the *Lotus Sūtra* and that birth has yet to occur.

23. Watson, p. 14; T.9.4a.1 ff.

occasioned by the final buddha's at-home reproduction. Because he has these eight sons, the final buddha Sun Moon Bright's exit from the household to become a buddha creates a gap in another, lower form of patriarchy. The gap between domestic father who has now become a buddha and his sons at home is revealed in the way the narrative explains that the sons only *hear* about their father's religious quest, implying that they are not with him and cannot see him and therefore must rely on narrative to focus on him. And yet, on hearing of their father's buddhahood, "they cast aside their princely positions and followed him by leaving family life."[24] But despite this gesture that mirrors their father's renunciation, a direct path to recovering their father is blocked, and it turns out that the narrative never allows these sons to directly rejoin the company of their father.

This gap between father and his sons is heightened when we learn that their father is soon to die but not until he establishes a circuitous and secondary conduit for his paternity whereby his abandoned sons can be fully fathered through the transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra.* This newly appearing mode of paternal transmission, though working to rejoin the broken connection between domestic father and his sons, only achieves these "private" goals by pulling these sons farther from domestic space into a public arena of Buddhist action in which an altogether unfamiliar surrogate father completes their identities.

In particular, this newly appearing substitute father figure is presented in the form of a bodhisattva named Wonderfully Bright *(Miao Guang),* a man who has no prior relation to the final buddha-father, his eight sons, or the lineage of twenty thousand buddhas. In place of any kind of filiation or other grounding legitimacy, this lineage-less surrogate father simply has received the *Lotus Sūtra,* which was given to him by the father of the eight sons just before his death. Apparently, once endowed with this textual transmission, Wonderfully Bright can, in the absence of their "real" father, work on these eight sons until they are identical with their now absent father.

In fact, this is the first time that the *Lotus Sūtra* speaks of itself coming into being. Just before dying, the final Sun Moon Bright buddha taught it for sixty kalpas (eons) with no one feeling the least bit weary. After his death the narrative traces out how his paternity seems to have flowed, via the *Lotus Sūtra,* into the receptive Bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright who keeps the sūtra and immediately sets to work using it to turn the eight sons into full-fledged replicas of their father:[25]

> After the Buddha had passed away, Bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright upheld the *Sūtra of the Lotus-like Miraculous Law,* for a period of fully eight small kalpas

24. Watson, p. 15; T.9.4a.5 ff.
25. Watson, p. 16, with very minor adjustments; T.9.4cb.6.

> expounding it for others. The eight sons of the Buddha Sun Moon Bright all acknowledged Wonderfully Bright as their teacher. Wonderfully Bright taught and converted them and roused in them the firm determination to gain unsurpassed enlightenment. Those princely sons gave offerings to immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of buddhas, and after that all were able to achieve the buddha way. The last to become a buddha was named Dīpaṃkara.

Below I explore the implications of inserting Dīpaṃkara, the buddha who in various non-Mahāyāna accounts is identified as Śākyamuni's most important progenitor, here at the end of this lineage, but for the moment suffice it to say that though the narrative works to explain the *Lotus Sūtra*'s role in overcoming the gap between the final buddha-father of the lineage of Sun Moon Bright buddhas and his eight sons, in fact there is a more complex narrative built around negotiating and collapsing two types of lineage and, in the process, relocating their powers of legitimacy in the *Lotus Sūtra.*

In this little vignette, the trouble obviously began when the father mixed within himself two types of patriarchy by leaving his at-home sons to join the set of 19,999 forefathers, who clearly belong in another lineage with a very different mode of reproduction. The unstated problem seems to be that if the father, as the twenty-thousandth buddha, had received the paternal essence (buddhahood) that constitutes that perfect lineage, how could it rightfully flow into his at-home sons, who, though they "naturally" have the right to inherit his identity and heritage according to at-home patriarchy, still do not have the right to inherit buddhahood in this nepotistic manner? Thus, as their father is refathered, the narrative has created a tension over whether that buddha heritage will be sucked into a lower level of patriarchy by sons who have legitimate claims on their father's lower paternal identity but not this higher buddha identity. This tension between layers of paternity will be resolved but only with the *Lotus Sūtra* playing a mediating role that will henceforth allow it to control entrance into all buddha families.

From the point of view of the eight sons, the exit of their father ruptures the at-home lineage in two ways. First, he is not present. Second, as he entered into that lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas, his identity is no longer directly repeatable in his sons, since, whereas the lineage inexplicably accepts their father, the narrative bars his sons' direct entry. Thus, given that their father now has two types of paternity lodged within himself, the sons' quest to rejoin him will only conclude when they regain their own paternity in a double manner that reflects his now doubled paternal status. Arguably, just this tension between levels of patriarchy sets the stage for much of what follows in the coming chapters in the *Lotus Sūtra* as all traditional Buddhists—identified as sons of the Buddha—are challenged to rediscover a deeper version of Buddhist sonship within themselves.

In terms of invoking the reader's desire, by joining these two disparate lineages in the figure of the final Sun Moon buddha-father, the narrative has created a frustrating mismatch in patriarchal succession.[26] The father has inherited a surplus of identity and perfection, yet the narrative seems to forbid the flow of that identity directly into his sons, even though the reader is invited to expect just this transmission. Given this temporary impasse, and the implicit assumption that a solution must be found, the narrative works to reattach these forsaken sons to their father but only after devising an alternative pathway that will allow for perfect buddha identity to flow between these two lineages but via an indirect and purified conduit that will in no way compromise the original status of the buddha patriarchy that was completely independent of domestic reproduction. Thus on one level the narrative appears to be searching for a way to write an ethereal, nondomestic form of patriarchy on top of a lower, more physical form of patriarchy and gain confirmation for this ploy by appealing to the reader's expectation for transmission on the *lower* level of at-home patriarchy.

Despite this impasse that the narrative constructs for itself, fusing these two levels begins immediately when the sons perform the filial act of following their father, an act that itself mixes levels because the sons reject the family sphere where just those filial attitudes of following one's father would have been forged. Thus, ironically, their involvement with the higher form of sonship is based on the lower sonship, even though the higher level of patriarchy destroys the lower level, despite resting, narratively at least, in dependence on it. In short, it is clear that all these lower-level sons will turn into buddhas, but this process of splicing together these two layers of patriarchy will be the occasion for the emergence of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which will resolve the tension between these lineages by taking paternal powers away from the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas and into its own perimeters where it can properly father anyone. And given that this fusion of higher and lower patriarchs effectively ends the initial lineage of twenty thousand buddhas, we probably ought to read this as the story of a "Fall," since the first patriarchy of twenty thousand buddhas reproduces without difference, without sons, and without angst, and yet this mode was ruined when the final figure in that lineage generated a secondary lineage that was completely the opposite of the initial lineage since it was a lineage built of difference: his sons all had different names, they presumably came from women, and in the end none of them came to be called Sun Moon Bright.

If we adopt this reading strategy of the "Fall," then, though this final Sun Moon Bright buddha will be the first to actually preach the *Lotus Sūtra,* in

26. A similar fusion of domestic genetics, kingship, and buddhahood is found in Watson, chap. 7, pp. 120 and 125, and seems to mark a place where even in the early chapters narrative material is getting recycled by later editor-authors.

many ways he seems like a fallen buddha. I would characterize him as "fallen" simply because unlike the other 19,999 buddhas and even his eight sons, he has reproduced sexually. None of the other buddhas reproduced sexually, and even his sons, in the only descriptive quality attributed to them, are said to have "constantly carried out brahma practice" (*chang xiu fanxing;* T.9.4a.7), that is, celibacy, and thus they are decidedly unlike their father, who fathered them with sex. Clearly, their chastity does not match his fecundity.

This difference in reproductive practices is even clearer in the fact that though his eight sons ultimately become identical with their father by becoming buddhas, they never father sons like their father did, suggesting an interesting failure to repeat while also casting his reproductive activities in bolder relief. Thus this last buddha is flanked by forefathers and descendants who never engage in exactly the kind of sexual reproduction that was his defining characteristic.[27] Reading in this manner suggests that the final buddha produces the *Lotus Sūtra* as a kind of paternal "supplement" that was designed to inscribe his eight sons in this higher form of patriarchy that does not brook the direct inclusion of sons that are produced according to other models. It is no surprise, then, that though the *Lotus Sūtra* will provide many more uses for itself, when it first issues forth from this final Sun Moon Bright buddha, it is immediately directed toward solving this problem of his private paternity.

To offer a modern analogy for this story, imagine that Thomas Jefferson had eight sons, and, after he was elected president, he wished that all eight sons would become president too. Given the rules of American democracy, which are designed precisely to break the back of private dynasties and nepotism, Jefferson's only recourse will be to construct another track of inclusion for his sons to adopt the mantle of the presidency. That is, the domestic ties cannot be presumed to legitimate the transmission of this higher kind of patriarchy even though these ties might motivate the founding father to find an alternative method to effect just this goal. To this end, Jefferson decides to found a school of political theory and endows it with his library of selected books on political philosophy. As his sons study in the library of this newly built school they will supposedly imbibe the essence of what it is that made Jefferson worthy to be president. Then, supposing an electorate that recognized the merits of this school, all eight might subse-

27. Oddly enough, the sons' celibacy matches the description of what the primal lineage supposedly had taught. Their teaching "was pure and without alloy, complete, clean and spotless, and bore the marks of brahma practice *(juzu qingbai fanxing zhi zu).*" One more interesting detail is that the primal lineage taught a simple and singular truth *(dunyi wuza),* but clearly things are getting complicated and multiform. Both of these points support a reading of the narrative as constructing a "Fall" from perfection that nevertheless was good in effect.

quently be elected president (one thinks of Yale and the Bush family). If this scenario occurred, then, Jefferson's school of political theory would have served as a kind of surrogate father whereby these sons received their father's patrimony but in a manner that overwrites their "biological" connection to him with a transmission of political wisdom and the tools needed to be legitimately elected. And, of course, the library will now appear as a kind of fetishized and externalized form of Jefferson's political legitimacy, now rather timelessly available to be absorbed by anyone through studious devotion.

With this analogy in mind, if we carefully read the genealogy that the *Lotus Sūtra* supplies for itself we can see a similar kind of restructuring of legitimacy at work with the fascinating engagement of three forms of patriarchy. First, there is the primal patrilineal reproduction as established in the twenty thousand buddhas lineage, which represent the oldest beings in the *Lotus Sūtra's* history and which in its final moment has to contend with a lower level of patrilineal reproduction—those eight sons conceived by the final buddha at home—which presents it with a "gap" problem. Overcoming that gap between public fathers without mothers, and the final public father's private sons, bears forth the paternal substitute in the form of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which resutures those eight sons to their father's (double) lineage and also opens the door such that all can receive this second-order patrimony via the *Lotus Sūtra* and presumably join the primal buddha family.

Looked at in this manner, this tool of Buddhist patriarchy is born in overcoming the gap between the two forms of patriarchy, a birth that then warrants its own use in overcoming every possible gap between any subject and that primal patriarchy, even the yawning gap between those readers outside of the narrative and these paternal figures in the narrative. We are not too far, then, from the metastasis of patriarchy, with patriarchy jumping over all sorts of gaps that it, ironically, creates and then claims to overcome. In all this jumping over of gaps, the main dynamic is provided by accepting the paternal narrative that replicating sameness is factually produced on either side of the gap and not constructed by the narrative that explains it.

Given these various patriarchal ploys, we ought to return to the interesting point that though the final buddha's relationship to his sons is cut and only resutured from a distance, after his death, these very sons are the first ones fathered by the *Lotus Sūtra.* While on one level this simply confirms my point that the narrative was constructed to create and then resolve this very private problem, there is in fact another angle worth exploring. With the eight sons as the first "needy" recipients of the *Lotus Sūtra* (the case of Wonderfully Bright's unmotivated reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* is considered below), we might suppose that there is a kind of confirmation offered by the narrative that proves its efficacy first on those who, from the lower point of view of sonship, are already "literally" sons of a buddha, and thus their pater-

nity is actually never in question. For the reader, then, the first example of refathering sons *in* the text *with* the text, an act that appears as a template for all later refathering, actually is performed in a place particularly secure for fathering, since it clearly overlaps and duplicates the lower level of sonship and thus seems less disputable. Put more directly, the first textual refathering occurs on the only figures onstage who are already sons of buddhas, and this likely was designed to comfort the reader who soon will be asked to accept a similar refathering, though without this substratum of a domestic family relationship with a buddha.

REAL PATERNITY DISPENSED BY SURROGATE FATHERS

Though this analysis has taken us quite far into issues of narrative, truth, and legitimacy, there are several more interesting aspects of this "story of two lineages" that recounts their mutual termination, even as that termination produces another paternal power in the public and forever mobile form of the fatherly discourse that has the same name as the text, "Lotus of the Wonderful Law." To get at these less obvious points, let me first note that as the last buddha-father of the twenty thousand buddhas lineage *preaches* the *Lotus Sūtra* to Wonderfully Bright, he has given to an out-group man an alienated form of his paternal powers that will allow this surrogate father to complete his own fatherly tasks. This gestures proves, implicitly, one of the sūtra's most basic claims—that discourse can replace paternity, or perhaps more provocatively, that paternity *is* discourse. Hence we ought to say that in constructing a paternal tool (the *Lotus Sūtra*) that will reach where he cannot go, the final buddha has made a seal of paternity that can be applied by anyone on anyone, and which returns everyone to the buddha lineage. In essence, then, the impossible duality of the final buddha's fatherhood may have ended the perfect mode of reproduction, but it was that very duality that diverted their reproductive powers into the hands of out-group men, now endowed with the *Lotus Sūtra,* who appear in that gap to first fuse those two lineages and then offer that pure paternity to all who would accept it.

Having noted how the *Lotus Sūtra* mined these two lineages for the double-jointed purpose of being legitimate and conferring legitimacy on its recipients, we ought to ask, Why does the final buddha have to die just as his replacement, in the form of the *Lotus Sūtra,* appears? That is, why did the narrative time the events so that his death occasions the first preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* outward into public space and the demise of the twenty thousand buddhas? The answer seems to be that if the *Lotus Sūtra* existed and could be used to father sons while a representative of that primal lineage still existed, there would be too many fathers onstage and a potential conflict of lineages since two sources of legitimacy would be in place. For the *Lotus Sūtra* to really appear as the new reproductive descendant of that lin-

eage, it cannot overlap with it and should only appear with the death of its final representative, just as each of the twenty thousand buddhas succeeded one another serially. Perhaps, too, the narrative is relying on the reader's sense of a kind of conservation of paternity. Thus proof of its new presence in the *Lotus Sūtra* would be indirectly found by its absence in the lineage where it used to be.

This reading seems sensible enough, but the text has included another transmission right at this death moment. The final Buddha Sun Moon Bright gives a certain bodhisattva, Virtue Storehouse, the prediction of being the next buddha, called "Pure Body." This narrative detail, however, seems inert because we never again hear of this figure, either in his bodhisattva or buddha identity. Presumably this detail is included simply to show that the final buddha was in fact reproductive according to the standard trope in traditional Buddhist mythology wherein buddhas "anoint" their successors. Noteworthy here is the way that the narrative abruptly leaves this dummy transmission to pursue the flow of sanctity and power that follows the gift of the *Lotus Sūtra* to Wonderfully Bright and then on to the final Sun Moon Bright's eight sons. Thus I suspect that this perfunctory transmission to "Pure Body," like the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning,* serves simply to confirm that the final buddha was reproductive and efficacious according to the standard mode, even as that mode is being opened up and reworked in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s account of its own role in producing buddhas.

When we look carefully at the final buddha's preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* to Wonderfully Bright there are several other provocative details. First, the narrative offers no reason for the final buddha's teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* to Wonderfully Bright, that single bodhisattva in the crowd of twenty million when the *Lotus Sūtra* first emerges in the narrative about itself. In fact, this gratuitous and inexplicable gift in a narrative obsessed with causes and genealogies is more than a little odd. Why, in this crucial first enactment of the standard A-to-B pattern, does this final buddha of the lineage preach the *Lotus Sūtra* simply "because of the bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright"?[28] What might be behind this simple and unexplained "because" linking the first teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* and this particular bodhisattva and his later "refathering" of the eight sons?

To address these issues surrounding this crucial moment when the *Lotus Sūtra* was first preached, let me note that up to this point the only detail we have learned about Wonderfully Bright comes at the beginning of this section where Mañjuśrī mentions that this bodhisattva had eight hundred disciples. Thus perhaps there is a kind of rhyme between his eight hundred disciples and the eight sons in need of a father, a rhyme scheme that seems

28. Watson, p. 16; T.9.4a.24.

roughly mirrored in the imbalance of the twenty thousand buddhas in the lineage and the twenty million bodhisattvas in the audience of this first teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra.* But even with this rather vague numeric association, Wonderfully Bright simply does not have a lineage, nor does he have a background that would justify playing this key role as the first recipient of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

This lack of a suitable background in the initial recipient seems incongruous because resolving the past (the incomplete eight sons) seems ultimately to be the motivation for this teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus, in terms of time, this initial preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* seems designed to move backward in time to complete the eight sons, who clearly represent a past problem, and yet this very first recipient of the discourse does not come with a past problem. Quite the contrary. Since the current narrator Mañjuśrī will soon claim that this bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright was none other than himself, the "because" explaining the first preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* seems to be necessary not in terms of Wonderfully Bright's background but rather in terms of his future role as the purveyor of just this narrative. If this is correct, then this is one of those interesting moments in the narrative when the flow of causality that the narrative has created for itself directly reveals its presence in its past with the "actual" events explained in the narrative *(fabula)* bearing the mark of being created to advance the account of events *(sjužet).*[29] In other words, just at this juncture the author of the narrative has sewn the working narrator, Mañjuśrī, into the narrative that he is developing.

But there is something else here to appreciate: this apparently gratuitous gift to Wonderfully Bright marks that critical moment when the narrative fully extracts legitimacy from this primal lineage that it has created as its foundation. As it leads patriarchal legitimacy out of the lineage into Wonderfully Bright, the ostensible goal is to solve the lineage's problem, but in fact this seems as but a ruse to explain how nonlineage figures suddenly took hold of patriarchal essences that are now separable from lineage figures and appear ready to be distributed in discourse or textual forms. That is, the narrative has created a flow of legitimacy that appears at first conservative in its zeal to restore legitimacy where it was lacking in the eight sons, even as the mechanism of that act completely revolutionizes legitimacy, exploding its hitherto private availability. What this means is the narrative has explained the emergence of this new alienated, and as yet untested, form of patriarchy simply as the effect of following basic rules of

29. For a useful discussion of the tension between these two forms of a narrative, see Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 24 ff. For an early, and in many ways clearer, discussion, see Boris Tomachevski's "Thématique," in Tzvetan Todorov, trans., *Théorie de la littérature* (1965; Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 272.

patriarchy. Ironically, the narrative vouches for itself by explaining that it was only by following the old rules of at-home patriarchy that this new rather deviant form of patriarchy emerged. The sons of that final buddha simply had to have their father's full transmission, even if this required a most unusual invention.

To begin to unravel the authorial care exercised in *legitimizing* the extraction and recodification of *legitimacy* within its own narrative presence and function, let me first clarify the narrative events in this section of the opening chapter. Once the final buddha has preached the *Lotus Sūtra* to Wonderfully Bright we see that Wonderfully Bright becomes the main agent in the flow of events. He upholds the *Lotus Sūtra,* fully fathers the eight sons, maintains his eight hundred disciples, and, in particular, works on a certain bodhisattva named Seeker of Fame who is especially greedy and inattentive to Buddhist teachings. Thus, just in terms of narrative coherence, the agency and efficacy of the twenty thousand buddhas, who taught and converted beings, is now replaced by the actions of Wonderfully Bright, who now teaches and converts beings.

Similarly, the unnamed teachings of the prior buddhas have now been replaced by the maintenance and explication of the *Lotus Sūtra.* This is no small detail; it shows that in order for the legitimacy of the primal lineage to pass into public space, the "content" of the buddhas' teaching has been reduced and fetishized into the perimeter of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which, henceforth, is counted as the reservoir of Buddhist truth and the essence of lineage legitimacy, two items that will be completely intertwined from now on. If Mañjuśrī had not been granted this privileged role in the narrative, then the narrative would have lost its focus as the *Lotus Sūtra* would have been dispersed widely into the vast audience on site at this initial teaching moment. Thus, for plot reasons alone, the narrative needs to restrict the transfer of the *Lotus Sūtra* to only one member of this vast audience of twenty million, and to have him, alone, identified as the eight sons' teacher. In line with the narrative's interest in creating streamlined causality and pairs of mutually confirming doubles, we should not miss that the narrative has at this moment introduced yet another singular figure, Seeker of Fame, who appears as the sole character in the audience worth mentioning and who, we suspect, will have everything to do with furthering the narrative's account of itself. In fact, we will shortly learn that this bodhisattva named Seeker of Fame is none other than Maitreya, Mañjuśrī's current interlocutor in the present at Rājagṛha.

Thus, on one level, as Wonderfully Bright a.k.a. Mañjuśrī turns these eight sons into buddhas he has established the template of the present teaching at Rājagṛha. In both places, Wonderfully Bright qua Mañjuśrī and the *Lotus Sūtra* function as a kind of "dual star" that condenses the totality of Buddhist truth and paternal legitimacy that had been lodged in the lin-

eage of the twenty thousand buddhas and then offers it to the public via the one figure who knows its deepest history. And yet both times that Mañjuśrī is shown offering the *Lotus Sūtra* outward to the public it seems that the actual recipient is Maitreya, who seems to stand in for the reader in a number of provocative ways that I explore below.

MAÑJUŚRĪ'S UNUSUAL SONSHIP

Seeing how the narrative prepared so brilliantly for Mañjuśrī's narrating role, we ought to revisit his sonship, which was established at the outset of the flashback when he was described as a "son of a Dharma King." But who is this "Dharma King," and why wasn't he brought onstage and introduced? The explanation for this lacunae probably lies in the narrative's hope to avoid a potential conflict of lineages. Thus Mañjuśrī as Wonderfully Bright does not have a fully articulated lineage, because if he did, the narrative would have to negotiate a legitimate connection between his lineage and Sun Moon Bright's. Instead of working this out, Wonderfully Bright is simply brought onstage without a clearly defined pedigree and receives the legitimizing essence of the final buddha Sun Moon Bright, in the form of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Wonderfully Bright then maintained that essence and in time refathered the final buddha's eight sons, thereby unavoidably inserting himself in the flow of paternal sanctity in order to complete a patriarchy that was not his own. Catching sight of his role as receptacle and mediator helps to explain one of the oddest things about his character.

When Wonderfully Bright receives the *Lotus Sūtra* from the final Sun Moon Bright buddha, it does not produce his own perfect sonship and subsequent absorption into the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas, as it did for the eight sons. But why should the narrative insist on this difference in causality? Wonderfully Bright receives the sūtra as the eight sons do, but when it comes into his hands, it changes nothing about him. In fact, he is the one person in the narrative whose reception of the narrative produces no joy, no new kinship, and no new wisdom. And yet when he expounds it for the eight sons it serves, along with their worship of innumerable buddhas, as the cause for their buddhahood. I suggest that this is not accidental but is due to the fact that at this moment in the narrative the *Lotus Sūtra*'s power to refather those who receive it has not yet been proven, since, in fact, that is exactly what the plotline is in the process of demonstrating.

There is, however, more of a paradox here that involves the attempt to collect the legitimacy of the lineage of twenty thousand buddhas and move it into the form of the *Lotus Sūtra* where it can, completely free of the buddhas, turn any recipient into a buddha. The problem is that the first gift of the *Lotus Sūtra* into public space, if it directly produced perfect Buddhist sonship, would be compromised because that effect might appear to have been

the effect of the donor—the final buddha. Moreover, it would mean that when this recipient then gave the *Lotus Sūtra* to another, it would again be given by a buddha, again casting doubt on the singular and totally self-reliant efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus to actually prove the independent power of the *Lotus Sūtra* to produce buddhas, it has to first be given to a nonbuddha who, without turning into a buddha in receiving the gift, then gives it to others, effecting their buddhahood in a way that does not impinge on the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim to total efficacy. To play this role, Mañjuśrī has to appear as a Teflon bodhisattva in the narrative—he is simply the pure conduit whereby the buddha-essence that was in the final Sun Moon Bright buddha can be received into public space only to then be reinstalled in his eight sons.

There is, of course, another more practical reason for Mañjuśrī's immunity to the *Lotus Sūtra:* if reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* had done to Wonderfully Bright what it does to the eight sons in the following sequence, then the story would have lost its narrator as he would have been absorbed by the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas and disappeared. Thus Mañjuśrī's earlier identity as Wonderfully Bright is left as that one moment in the entire narrative where the gift of the *Lotus Sūtra* has no particular effect: there is no mention of him regaining his sonship and certainly no mention of his imminent slide into buddhahood, a slide that would have curtailed his usefulness as an omniscient narrator. Ironically, then, in the narrative's narrative about its total efficacy, its first recipient remains immune to its powers in order to be the agent in disseminating its efficacy. Mañjuśrī, then, as something like the lord of the *Lotus Sūtra,* is the one figure in the text who can wield it without it ruining his much-needed identity as a nonbuddha.

To sum up these points, the narrative has objectified itself such that explaining its legitimate origins in the present also carries with it an implicit censure for that audience of one who called for just that history. Maitreya, who is currently receiving this genealogy, learns at the end of this account that he has been, in fact, hearing his own history. When Mañjuśrī explains to Maitreya that that wayward student who had been singled out in the description of his first batch of eight hundred students—Seeker of Fame—was in fact Maitreya, Maitreya has been made to recognize that this story is also *his* genealogy but one that he can only currently accept by admitting his past failure to correctly receive Buddhist paternity and the ever important narrative that delivers it. Thus as Mañjuśrī received and upheld the *Lotus Sūtra* and then used it to finish fathering the final buddha's eight sons, Maitreya, though in the crowd, remained untouched by the earliest presentation of the narrative. Certainly the powerful paternity that the narrative claims for itself did not enter Maitreya, and thus his current reception of the narrative comes with the burden of admitting an earlier turning away from something that should have, long ago, returned him to his full and

rightful identity. The narrative thus has arranged for a series of plotlines that create a fecund past that legitimizes all narrated activity, as well as the account of that activity, even as it weaves a web around the controller of that past—Mañjuśrī—and the receiver of that past—Maitreya. In short, the narrative has created a self-verifying account of itself so that its form, content, origin, authority, and reception are presented with staggering attention to detail and a rare sense for what is needed to draw a suspicious "reader" like Maitreya into such a vision.

MAITREYA'S DECADENCE

In keeping with the level of sophistication in this well-crafted narrative, the current speaking moment finds that it too has an A-to-B pattern, since the current speech is but the continuation of a speech that began long ago, even if Maitreya cannot remember it. Essentially this means that Maitreya, and implicitly the reader who is reading through Maitreya's character, learns that he has been both deeply involved in the plot and impervious to it. Or better, he learns that he *has* been impervious to the plot and all that could change right now. Maitreya's original lackluster identity implicit in his prior name, Seeker of Fame, is emphasized in even harsher terms when Mañjuśrī explains: "He was greedy for gain and support, and though he read and recited numerous sūtras *(sui fudu song zhongjing),* he could not understand them, and for the most part forgot them."[30]

Clearly, Maitreya has not been doing very well at being a good Buddhist, and given his rather lackadaisical performance as a reader, it apparently is going to take a miracle in the form of the *Lotus Sūtra* to overcome his bad study habits and put him on the right track that will lead to his future buddhahood. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* rewrites Maitreya's identity so that he isn't anyone of note, not even a good Buddhist, until he is rechristened with the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus from the outset it looks like the *Lotus Sūtra* denigrated Maitreya so that he could be returned to his former buddha-to-be status once he has wholeheartedly received the *Lotus Sūtra,* a process that has profound implications for the legitimacy of the old Buddhist hierarchy that he used to inhabit, as well as for the traditional reader who, more likely than not, used to consider Maitreya as the wonderful sole descendant of Śākyamuni.

In considering why Maitreya is so thoroughly demoted by the *Lotus Sūtra,* the first thing to mention is that he is presented in an unflattering light in other Mahāyāna works. For instance, in the *Vimalakīrti* and the *Guhyasamaja-*

30. Watson, p. 16, with minor changes; T.9.4b.11.

tantra he also plays the fall guy.[31] Presumably he is subjected to degrading treatment because he represents a pre-Mahāyāna attempt to create an example of a Buddhist son who is destined to become the father, and thus he represents a kind of limited and particular sonship that needs to be opened up to give way to a universally available sonship, in keeping with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s command that all beings become sons of the Buddha. However, there are also good reasons for thinking that in addition to being demoted from the particular son on his way to becoming the universal father, he has been turned inside out so that he is to be read as a cipher for "everyman." In this perspective his sins become subtle invitations to the reader, who sees in these shortcomings proof that he too will be accepted. Thus, as a sinner of sorts, Maitreya is presented as the best place for the reader to identify—all readers know that they are not what others think they are, even as they are very concerned about what others think of them, and Mañjuśrī has looked into Maitreya, piercing his exterior to render this unflattering appraisal of Maitreya's greed and pride, but nonetheless this appraisal does not prevent Maitreya from being included in the group. Thus in the process of presenting and overlooking Maitreya's sins, the text encourages everyman's entrance into a parallel program. Of course, too, the text went out of its way to say that Maitreya's past failures coalesced around his tendency toward *bad reading,* a detail that no doubt was designed to spur the reader to avoid Maitreya's errors, which might similarly lead to lost time and lack of self-knowledge.

WHY DĪPAṂKARA AND MAITREYA TAKE A FALL

To shed some more light on the *Lotus Sūtra*'s reconstruction of traditional authority and legitimacy, we need to come to terms with how its account of itself undermines the traditional notions of Śākyamuni's patriline. To read the *Lotus Sūtra* without paying attention to these revisions in the prior buddha-lineage is to miss a large part of the text's agenda. In these early chapters, it is clear that the author understands that the narrative can only offer the reader a place of prominence in the buddha-family by downplaying the uniqueness of the two buddhas—Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya—that flanked Śākyamuni in the traditional version of the buddha-lineage. Thus for the *Lotus Sūtra* to take control over publicly dispensing full filial relations to the Buddha, it had to unhinge and overcome the prior patriarchal forms that had so narrowly controlled inclusion in the Buddha's family.[32]

31. For some comments on Maitreya's complex character, see Lewis Lancaster, "Maitreya," in *Encyclopedia of Religions,* ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 136–41.

32. Regarding new, more "public" versions of Buddhist identity, I need to again direct readers to Jonathan S. Walters's essay "Stūpa, Story, and Empire: Construction of the Buddha

In non-Mahāyāna accounts, Dīpaṃkara Buddha is usually recognized as Śākyamuni's key predecessor and worshiped as a singularly important figure who met Śākyamuni in the distant past and conferred on him the right to become the next buddha.[33] In this role, Dīpaṃkara is, by virtue of his place in the lineage of buddhas, the crucial cause of Śākyamuni's future buddha-identity and is the main legitimizing figure that acts to recognize Śākyamuni's eventual buddhahood. As we have seen, in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* Dīpaṃkara is cut away from that simple family of buddhas as they had been known and given a new family that is constructed around that hitherto unknown set of twenty thousand buddhas and the exchange of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

More precisely, the *Lotus Sūtra* attaches Dīpaṃkara to its own history by claiming that the last of the eight sons that the last of the twenty thousand buddhas fathered at home became Dīpaṃkara, once he was given the *Lotus*

Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 160–94. He makes the fine argument that the narratives supporting stūpa-worship in the post-Aśokan texts, the *Apadāna* in particular, seem designed to include all participants in the Buddha's biography, and thus there seems to have been a parallel effort to "nationalize" Buddhist identity by rendering the Buddha's biography as a matrix for including all Buddhists. Though the *Apadāna* isn't accessible to me in Pāli, I gather from Walters's remarks that the narrative also involves a critical doubling in which the audience hears of their current stūpa worship as the reflection of a deeper historical narrative that also explains where these deeds will lead in the future. Authenticity and desire for that authenticity, then, are tendered to participants in a pan-temporal display. Arguably, a very similar template is structuring the *Lotus Sūtra*'s manipulation of Maitreya and the reader.

33. For a particularly full account of their meeting, see the *Buddhavaṃsa,* trans. I. B. Horner, in *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon,* pt. 3: *Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) and Basket of Conduct (Cariyapitaka)* (London: Pāli Text Society, 1975), pp. 11–17. Śākyamuni's connection with the list of twenty-four buddhas, which begins with Dīpaṃkara, is also cited in the *Commentary to the Jātakas;* see Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1896), pp. 32–33; or T. W. Rhys-Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories* (London: Trubner and Co., 1880). For a particularly interesting and expanded version of Śākyamuni's initiation at the hands of Dīpaṃkara Buddha, see the Divyāvadāna in John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995), pp. 19–23. A nearly identical account of Dīpaṃkara is given in the *Mahāvastu,* trans. J. J. Jones, in *Sacred Books of the Buddhists,* vol. 1 (London: Luzac and Co., 1949), pp. 188 ff. In other lineages provided for Śākyamuni, Dīpaṃkara is not mentioned, and one finds instead only the latter six buddhas of the longer list of twenty-four as in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta,* translated by Walshe in his *The Long Discourses of the Buddha,* p. 199. If one can trust Faxian's early-fifth-century travelogue as at least partly imprinted by then current Buddhist folklore, then several Indian sites maintained a variety of stories about previous buddhas; see in James Legge, trans., *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (1886; reprint New York: Dover, 1965), pp. 51, 55, 63–64. Finally, there is some evidence in the various vinayas that the preceding Buddha Kāśyapa, or rather his remains, was of importance to several early Buddhist communities. For some details and sources, see Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), chap. 2, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism," esp. p. 28 ff.

Sūtra.[34] By making these claims, the *Lotus Sūtra* has essentially made itself the father of Dīpaṃkara because it is only in receiving the *Lotus Sūtra* that Dīpaṃkara enters into the buddha-lineage. Consequently, Dīpaṃkara's relationship to Śākyamuni Buddha has been subsumed into the much larger history of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which now claims itself as the sanctifying element that explains both Dīpaṃkara's identity and his relationship to Śākyamuni. In short, according to the *Lotus Sūtra,* these two buddhas are but recent placeholders in the much more extensive lineage of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus Dīpaṃkara, instead of being a solid source of legitimacy for Śākyamuni's identity, as he was in earlier genealogies, is now but a recent receptacle for the *Lotus Sūtra,* which he himself had to rely on to achieve his buddha-identity. In all this, the *Lotus Sūtra* has presented itself as the Thing that is passed down the chain of buddha-patriarchs, a claim that obviously has rich import for its movement into the reader's hands.

To visualize more clearly this ploy of "overlaying" the history of the traditional, pre-Mahāyāna buddha-family with the history of the *Lotus Sūtra,* let us first imagine a horizontal track of twenty-four buddhas, with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara on one end and Śākyamuni on the other.[35] On top of this simple lineage, the *Lotus Sūtra* introduced a vertical conduit of immense length that was poured into Dīpaṃkara, thereby setting him at the end of the much more massive lineage that transmits the *Lotus Sūtra.* Of course, this reconfiguration effectively renders Dīpaṃkara and the other twenty-three buddhas inconsequential as a point of origin, since the real place of origin is none other than the *Lotus Sūtra,* whose history is the "real" history of buddhahood.

Besides hollowing out the prior track of buddhas, Buddhist truth has now been encapsulated in the *Lotus Sūtra* because it alone holds the succession of buddhas together. In this maneuver, the *Lotus Sūtra* presents itself as an incredibly efficacious item that now looms as the sole Thing that retains Buddhist enlightenment and enables the reproduction of the buddha-lineage. Consequently, Dīpaṃkara's cachet as Śākyamuni's predecessor is hijacked so that though he remains Śākyamuni's progenitor of sorts, this role has been reduced to being no more than a point of contact with the

34. Watson, p. 21; T.9.4b.11.

35. There is in the Buddhavaṃsa's account of these twenty-four buddhas an obvious structural anomoly. Śākyamuni is the only buddha who receives a prediction from Dīpaṃkara, the first of the twenty-four buddhas. The other twenty-three buddhas between these two seem not to be blessed in a similar manner, and thus Śākyamuni's buddha-identity issues from both Dīpaṃkara's prediction and from his place at the end of the lineage. Presumably the author of the *Lotus Sūtra* recognized Dīpaṃkara as the particularly potent "distant" father of Śākyamuni and chose to attach his new lineage there instead of using Kāśyapa who was Śākyamuni's most immediate predecessor.

powerfully potent and previously unknown lineage-essence, the *Lotus Sūtra,* which claims that it is, itself, that which makes buddhas. Thus by writing its own history on top of the previous buddha-history, the *Lotus Sūtra* was able both to trump the prior version and to borrow its legitimizing form: Śākyamuni is still a buddha because of his contact with Dīpaṃkara; it is just that we now have the much bigger narrative of the *Lotus Sūtra* explaining that contact and the all-powerful Thing that made that contact efficacious.

Thus, by the end of the introductory chapter, we have been "shown" a history of the *Lotus Sūtra* that takes itself to be the be-all and end-all of Buddhism in such a manner that the most familiar buddhas—Dīpaṃkara, Śākyamuni, and Maitreya—appear to be no more than current givers and receivers of this much more massive reality of truth that is responsible for their identities and legitimacy. In sum, the structure of truth and legitimacy as it had been known in pre–*Lotus Sūtra* Buddhism has been hollowed out and reconstituted in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* so that the *Lotus Sūtra* itself appears as the final arbitrator of buddha-identity, even as it piggybacks on those prior forms as sites for proving its own efficacy. In the end, Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya have their exalted status partially returned to them, but the cause of that status has been redefined as reception of the *Lotus Sūtra,* an item that, as we will see, can go anywhere, rendering defunct the notion of a separate, singular buddha-lineage.

MAITREYA'S CONVERSION AND THE FIRST SET OF VERSES

It is not possible here to offer line-by-line interpretations of everything that happens in this crucial first chapter, but I want to draw out some of the more interesting narrative ploys evident in explaining Maitreya's role in the telling of the narrative about the narrative. For instance, at one point early on in the chapter Maitreya restates what has happened in the narrative thus far, summing up the initial light miracle but now in verse form. There has been no small amount of debate about what this kind of doubling of prose and verse might mean in Mahāyāna sūtras. Some scholars argue that it represents the mark of an earlier oral form of the text that was then incorporated into a more literary, Sanskritized form; others argue that the doubling is an attempt to offer the verse form in a more "transmittable" form—a song, in other words. I am not convinced by either of these explanations for two reasons: the text is all about doubling things, and so that it fully doubles itself in literary format need not be explained via a cause outside of the text itself—its history or its outreach intentions; and when read carefully, this verse, at least, does not simply double the preceding prose narrative but instead does some rather heavy lifting that moves the whole narrative for-

ward to the next section, and thus it is integral to the text and not a simple doubling at all, though it calls itself such.[36]

The first thing to note in reading the verses that supposedly restate the meaning of the preceding prose section is that the generic vision of truth via the Buddha's light is now presented as Maitreya's own vision. What had been presented in narrative by a narrator to whom we were never introduced now comes as Maitreya's account of what *he and the others* saw. So, far from being gratuitous repetition, the verse section moves the vision of truth from the words of the faceless narrator into the being of one of the beings created in the narrative, and this shift gives the vision a securer reality as it now has a "visible" spokesperson in the narrative, an anchoring that it lacked when it was just the product of the uncertified external narrator.

Another remarkable shift of vision is accomplished in this verse section that is altogether absent in the prose: by the end of the verse, Maitreya states that now the whole audience is staring at Maitreya and Mañjuśrī as they seek to understand the vision. As Maitreya says, "Buddha son, Mañjuśrī, I beg you to settle the doubts of the assembly. The four kinds of believers look up in happy anticipation, gazing at you and me."[37] Here it seems that after having subsumed the omniscient narration into his own experience, and thus inviting the reader to gaze *into* the miraculous vision through his own eyes, he now pulls back to address an audience that takes him as an object. Of course, though this audience is in the narrative, in fact, this gesture serves perfectly well to stabilize the reader's gaze into the narrative so that he or she can either alight on Maitreya's face or enter his vision, a doubling that presumably makes the reading experience seem more lifelike because one can see the narrator and then enter into his experience through receiving his words.

Of course, much more could be said about how the narrative is constructing facsimiles of auditory reception, but for now let us note that this structure of moving between Maitreya as object and subject-position appears as a perfect bookend for the parallel structure that initiated the vision when the audience stared in rapture *at* Śākyamuni but then somehow saw through his physical form to see what he saw, or at least a portion of it, as the audience took in the cosmic vision of reality in the eastern quadrant. This narrative attempt to create figures and then move the reader inside *their* vision is, I would argue, an essential part of offering a narrative that disappears into the Real that it is creating. That is, it is just in this kind of gesture that language can fully disappear as language.

A third and final element in this verse is worth noting: an abundance of father-son logic appears in Maitreya's account of what he saw, as Maitreya,

36. The omniscient narrator explains that Maitreya, "wishing to state this meaning once more . . . ; T.9.2b.7.

37. Watson, p. 13; T.9.3c.5.

quite unlike the prose section, relies on the trope "son of the Buddha" to identity bodhisattvas. This is particularly interesting because the answer that Mañjuśrī will give to Maitreya is all about fathers and sons: Mañjuśrī resolves the doubt about the vision of truth with the narrative of that lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas. Thus it is as though in the verse bridge between the two prose sections, Maitreya first grounds the cosmic vision in his own person, thereby ratifying it to some degree, and then establishes sonship as a crucial topic that needs to be addressed in resolving the legitimacy of the vision of truth, even as he and the reader will soon learn of his complicated connection to the *Lotus Sūtra* and its payload of patriarchy. With the gaze of the internal and external audience fixed on Maitreya and Mañjuśrī, the author has us primed to receive Mañjuśrī's answer, which arguably is the climax of the chapter, confirming the vision of truth, establishing the legitimacy of the discourse, and positioning a Mahāyāna version of fathers and sons at the center of the text's concerns.

THE HEART OF LIGHTNESS; OR, THE PARTICULAR SITE OF UNIVERSAL SUBJECTHOOD

Standing back from this account of the first chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra,* one might think that the two halves of the first chapter, Śākyamuni's light miracle and the history of the twenty thousand buddhas, are separate and treatable in isolation from one another. However, as I hinted earlier, there is a thematic holding them together, a thematic that is best characterized as public-private exchanges of total truth mediated by the *Lotus Sūtra.* In the light miracle, we watch the singular figure of the Buddha broadcast his light to the vast public of the universe, and this light causes the public to see one another in truth, a truth that has to be explained by relying on the *Lotus Sūtra.* The second vignette functions in the same way: we hear about the fall of the singular private source of truth-being in the twenty thousand buddhas, which, once dispersing or broadcasting its "issue" of paternity into the public sphere, comes to depend on the *Lotus Sūtra* as the link between the center and any periphery. Thus both of these public-private exchanges rely on creating a singular center that has the right to be the locus of all public commerce of identity, devotion, and truth, a locus that then requires the mediation of the *Lotus Sūtra* to verify it and secure its reception in the audience and in the reader. Thus, in fact, the light miracle, the figure of the historical buddha, the previously unknown cosmic lineage of twenty thousand buddhas, and the *Lotus Sūtra* are positioned as a kind of four-square in which the reader is bounced from one corner of sanctity and perfection to another, though this is occurring within the narrative of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

To make this point, let me consider carefully the details of the opening setting of the chapter where we are given the historical Buddha at the cen-

ter of the surrounding multitude that includes all the major beings in the Buddhist cosmology, historical and nonhistorical—devas, nāgas, cosmic kings, and so on. In this grand setting, Śākyamuni is clearly the site where all public interest is focused, finding in him the beloved singular object that in a moment will issue forth truth and pleasure for all and, moreover, will allow the public to come to know itself. As light comes out of this hallowed center, each individual is, after a fashion, not only joined to that radiant core when the light touches him or her but also fused with all other beings, for this light gives the audience the ability to see every other site and every other creature in the universe, or at least in the eastern quadrant.

Thus the Buddha as dispenser of magical light serves to establish a kind of total intersubjectivity, rendering all visible to all, a place where public and private are completely collapsed in one beatific vision.[38] The function of this dialectical interaction between the audience and the Buddha is actually a bit more complicated because it is obviously staged for the reading audience. As readers we are actually being directed to watch others watch each other, thereby producing a significant doubling of intersubjectivity that now revolves around the author's ability to direct our eyes just to this site of total vision that he has created, and yet he has not exactly managed to include us. To do so, he would have had to include in the vision images of beings reading the *Lotus Sūtra.* However, he seems to have been leery of explicitly calling attention to the narrative as text this early in his narration, and thus there is no mention of beings within the framed vision doing what we outside of the frame are doing—reading about the vision. In short, it seems that the narrative is reluctant to draw attention to this significant line between orally receiving the *Lotus Sūtra* and reading it.

In the verse account of this vision that follows this prose version, there is mention of seeing bodhisattva monks chanting sūtras *(song jingdian),* but no details are supplied about what they are chanting and whether it is from a text or an oral transmission.[39] The binome in the Chinese, *jingdian,* sounds fairly substantial and booklike, but at any rate the narration of the vision only provides for seeing the act of its oration, thereby keeping the sūtra-as-object less than visible. While textuality is markedly absent in the vision, legality as something visual comes to the fore since beings supposedly *see* Buddhist laws at work in all their permutations, just as one *sees* the division of the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna. This seeing of the law is crucial because Buddhist laws of causality are always invisible to all but buddhas. Moreover,

38. Despite this fusion of public and private, there is also a more one-way exchange since worship and attention go into this center, whereas law, identity, agenda, and pleasure come out of it.

39. T.9.3a.19.

the entire episode is staged to narratively show, that is, make "visible," what will later appear as orally dispensed information about Buddhist history and Mahāyāna practices. Thus, again, the text seems to be building itself around doubles that create and distribute authority by engaging mutually confirming forms.

Within this collection of doubles in this vision, there is another one at work. As the description of the light miracle makes clear, the light goes out from the Buddha-center, and as it touches all beings, this light allows each individual to see the totality of beings via the center, which ironically has to disappear in the act of serving as hub. Thus, apparently, to be the junction for total intersubjectivity, the Buddha as the center of the gaze has to disappear, and it is that erasure that provides for a higher level of vision. Moreover, once the figure that held the center disappears in creating the vision for the audience, facsimiles of him appear in the vision. Thus, oddly, it seems that buddhahood is demoted to just another object in the vision since in it all beings see buddhas as objects and not subjects to be entered as places for re-viewing. Furthermore, it is explicitly said that one sees these buddhas live and die, again establishing the ontic gap between the viewer and the viewed. Thus the narrative has created two classes of beings who exist on fundamentally different timelines, with the viewer and the reader now in some timeless narrative space watching other beings as important as buddhas move in and out of existence, while the viewer remains securely outside of time.[40]

Just as the text steadily doubles itself as subject and object in so many different ways, it does the same thing to the Buddha. In fact, the function that the text gives to the light-emitting Śākyamuni is exactly the one it would like to perform: the *Lotus Sūtra* as center of truth manifests itself to the public, who are to see in it the laws of Buddhist practice that are to include discourses on the difference between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, and so on. Most fascinating is that the Buddha is both present and absent in the vision that he created, just as the *Lotus Sūtra* is both present and absent in its views of itself and its laws. Arguably, as the *Lotus Sūtra* constructs this vision for the reader, it is simultaneously displaying the very powers it would like to claim as its own, and this happens as words turn into things and stop being language. Quite literally, as the narrative produces a facsimile of vision in the reader, the only way that we can see this manifestation of total universal truth is if we can *stop seeing* the text as text and enter into it just as we entered into first the Buddha and then Maitreya. For just like the Buddha who dis-

40. Perhaps this type of watching of other beings in time is the essence of all narration. Note, too, that this position is the one that matches Mañjuśrī's in this chapter since he is the deathless viewer.

appears in the *being seen through to see all being* in this opening scene, the narrative of that vision must dissolve into the vision, leaving no remainder of itself and its history to stain or encumber the view.[41]

This initial transcendental vision, however, produced doubt. Somehow a vision of total truth upsets the crowd as the vision of total truth failed to explain itself, leaving the crowd wanting to know why this unusual dispensation had been given to them. This is, of course, the demand for closure and legitimation: the vision's origin and authenticity must be vouched for; the vision needs a *cause,* a father, in other words, who exists at a higher level and in another medium, and this kind of paternity clearly cannot be found on the level of buddhas who are within it. This is the crucial if unstated act of demoting the buddhas and seeking a larger frame of legitimacy to secure them. Clearly, in overcoming their authority, the *Lotus Sūtra* is going to need to construct a frame of reference for itself that is far grander than the purview of the buddhas. As the legitimizing history of the twenty thousand buddhas shows, this vision in the *Lotus Sūtra* will be legitimized by creating a range of authenticating figures such that the *Lotus Sūtra,* as a literary structure that produced the vision and its authenticating figures, will also be secured as authentic.

GETTING REFATHERED

Though I am jumping ahead just a touch, I do not want to leave this discussion without noting that in matching this procedure of hollowing out and refathering the traditional track of buddha-patriarchs by inserting the *Lotus Sūtra* as their defining cause, the *Lotus Sūtra* also constructs the current reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a moment of refathering for the recipient, a moment that also requires hollowing out older forms of legitimacy. Thus faithful reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* is shown to be but another moment in the combination of patriarchy and truth, for as one receives the *Lotus Sūtra* as truth, one gains from the text, just as Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya did, the legitimacy to claim to have *truly* become a son of the Buddha. Truth, then, as the *Lotus Sūtra* presents it, is essentially a patriarchal matter because it comes from a patriarchy and goes on to make more patriarchy.

Of course, the tricky part is that there are three levels at work as the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative explains itself and its powers. On one level, what we might

41. This gap between the "piecemeal" construction of the vision from literature and the image of "totality" assumed in the vision is quite provocative given that this is also the condition of the writing of the text, and of sonship in general, which as I argued above is about resuturing a subject cut from another form of being in order to give it a more universal and linguistic form. Or, put differently, all these gestures involve simultaneously relying on, and disavowing, a formulating matrix.

call the deep historical narrative, past figures in the narrative such as Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni are shown receiving the *Lotus Sūtra* as a Thing larger than themselves that is solely responsible for correctly bringing them into their buddha-identities. Thus the *Lotus Sūtra* lineage proves its prowess by explaining itself as that which made the traditional lineage. On the next level, what we might call the contemporary moment, the narrative will show, in the following chapters, Śākyamuni giving the *Lotus Sūtra* to refather his disciples, such as Śāriputra, in acts that too make tradition. The third level is, of course, the narrative's presentation of itself to the reader in the form of the promise that just as it fathered the buddhas, and just as Śākyamuni relied on it to fully father his disciples, so too can the reader receive from the text that very seal of legitimacy that has supposedly made every other legitimate Buddhist.

To begin to make sense of this multilayered reconstitution of truth, legitimacy, and lineage, let us consider how Buddhist sonship is explicitly doubled in that middle level of what I called the contemporary moment. In narrating the conversions of the standard historical figures such as Śāriputra, it is clear that the father-son rhetoric in the *Lotus Sūtra* is not itself without precedent, for it seems to derive from a pre-Mahāyānic father-son discourse that it acknowledges overtly, yet develops in complicated ways. In chapter 3, at the key moment when the narrative demonstrates its productive efficacy by having the Buddha convert Śāriputra to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s version of Buddhism, Śāriputra, who is identified as the paragon of pre-Mahāyānic Buddhism and who had been introduced as the "one regarded as the Buddha's eldest son" *(wo wei fo zhangzi),* says:

> But now I have heard from the Buddha what I had never heard before, a Law never known in the past, and it has ended all my doubts and regrets. My body and mind are at ease and I have gained a wonderful feeling of peace and security. Today, at last, I understand that *truly* I am the Buddha's son, born from the Buddha's mouth, born through conversion to the Law, gaining my share of the Buddha's law.[42]

Minus the "truly," this passage is nearly identical to a passage in the *Aggañña Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya,* and others in the Pāli Canon, and since it issues from the mouth of a speaker who was already introduced in the text as a son-of-the-Buddha, we should understand that this passage is aimed at redefining Buddhist sonship by using an older template of Buddhist sonship

42. T.9.10c.10; trans. Watson, p. 48. Śāriputra calls himself the Buddha's "eldest son" earlier; Watson, p. 20. For a discussion of oral birthing, see my "Homestyle Vinaya and Docile Boys in Chinese Buddhism," positions: east asia cultures critique 7, no. 1 (spring 1999): 5–50; and Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," in *Women in World Religions,* ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 7–8, 259 n. 11.

on itself.[43] Thus as Śāriputra, introduced as son, gets the new law, the miraculous law of the Lotus, his conversion is articulated as a rebirth from old Buddhism into new Buddhism via the Buddha's mouth. Moreover, this is all accomplished as his newly refound father reveals to him the much grander narrative of Buddhist identity as defined by the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus a "real" son of the Buddha, as defined by the *Lotus Sūtra*'s internecine polemic, is a son of the Buddha twice over, a doubling generated through replacing the older Buddhist narrative of sonship with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s.

Of course, this conversion sequence is just another version of what the narrative had done to Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya on what I called the level of deep history. All three figures, who would have been expected to be full of Buddhist wisdom and legitimacy, are shown to be in a state of lack and incompletion. This lack, of course, is ended once they receive the *Lotus Sūtra.* What is different in Śāriputra's case is that his conversion is presented as a much more human event and he is shown to be an altogether approachable figure. Too, he speaks in the first-person and announces the pleasure and satisfaction that come with this refathering. Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya weren't allowed to express these emotions because, in fact, their conversion experiences weren't explicitly narrated. Also, neither of those more elevated figures was shown previously locked in a Hīnayāna identity as Śāriputra was.

Actually, Śāriputra's conversion is scripted to look much more like the sequence that the reader is expected to reproduce: the formal renunciation of a prior Buddhist identity, performed in the expectation that executing that allegiance is the doorway into inclusion in the larger family of "real" Buddhists, a family that the narrative had constructed for the reader in the earlier part of its history of itself. I explore these dynamics more thoroughly in the next chapter.

With just this brief glance at fathers and sons in the first chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra,* let us return to first principles to clarify what we are looking for. This is that crucial moment in the circle of hermeneutics when, after an initial plunge into an analysis, theoretical options ought to be scattered on the

43. See Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha,* p. 409. In support of my general argument regarding the metastasis of patriarchy, this line in the *Aggañña Sutta* follows an earlier parallel one in which it is the god Brahma and not the Buddha who plays the role of higher father: "the Brahmans are the true children of Brahma, born from his mouth, born of Brahma, created by Brahma, heirs of Brahma" (p. 407). Thus, in terms of playing oneupsmanship by reconstructing fathers, the *Lotus Sūtra* is doing to traditional Buddhism what Buddhism had done to Brahmanism.

By citing a passage in the Pāli Canon, I do not mean to imply that our received version of the *Aggañña Sutta* necessarily predates the *Lotus Sūtra.* However, the passage in the *Aggañña Sutta* does present a simpler version of Buddhist sonship and thus is likely an example of the form that the *Lotus Sūtra* was working to overhaul. For arguments regarding the late formation of the Pāli Canon, see Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks,* esp. pp. 23–30.

table to see what will and will not be of use so that we can return to a more careful scrutiny of the narratives in the text.

A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Even ignoring the lineage issues in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra,* as many modern commentators do, no one familiar with this text could be surprised by the statement that the trope of fathers and sons is readily visible in many of the chapters: for instance, there is the "Burning House" parable with the "father of the world" saving his sons, or the parable of the so-called Prodigal Son finally realizing his relationship to the awe-inspiring, wealthy father, or again, the Medicine King Bodhisattva, who kills himself so that he may be reborn and rightfully inherit the patrimony of the buddha he had been serving.[44] These are just some examples. The list could easily be lengthened, and in each case the father-son motif works in the narrative to establish the conduit for conversion to the Mahāyāna but then is also applied to reader of the text who, like the various actors in the narrative, is identified as a son of the Buddha in this revised Mahāyāna form and is offered entrance into this new family provided that he converts to this image of the Buddha-father as presented by the *Lotus Sūtra.*

So, let us ask the broadest question: What might all these father and son motifs be doing in the *Lotus Sūtra?* The first of all possible answers is the most audacious, and it is arguably the default position in most modern thinking about the *Lotus Sūtra:* These fathers and sons don't really mean anything. To support this position, one might have recourse to one or both of the following claims: (1) There are many accidental things in any text, and this is just a good example of what might fall in the soup; (2) It's not accidental, but it's only a manner of speaking—a vestige, a mindless metaphor, or a "literary device," that in no way disturbs the deeper meanings in the text, meanings that modern commentators and enthusiasts like to restrict to wisdom, compassion, expedient means, and so on—all the normal things one says about Mahāyāna Buddhism. As far as I know, no one has brazenly made this argument, and instead the topic of fathers and sons slips by, as so many things do in Buddhist studies.

Against this position, I would like to assume the opposite—that the motif of fathers and sons does matter to the construction of meaning in this text and that this motif is even a dominant one that overshadows issues such

44. Other father-son episodes include the vignette in the chapter called "Lifespan," in which the father as doctor fakes his death so that his sons who have taken poison can be healed by his medicine (Watson, pp. 227–29); or the penultimate chapter in which two sons of a heretical Brahman father agitate with their mother to allow them to follow the Buddha, their real father (Watson, pp. 312–18).

as emptiness, the Perfection of Wisdom, and compassion, topics that just on the basis of quantity and development do not get much attention in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Obviously, starting with this hypothesis locates our reading closer to the contents of the text and requires no preemptive denial of the text's overall direction or its recurrent topics. If we are inclined to accept that fathers and sons might be important to the text on several levels, I would like to explore briefly several theoretical frameworks that might help to literally "come to terms" with the topic of Buddhist paternity. I have organized these perspectives into four clusters, though they overlap and could be expanded into several more distinct fields of speculation. I have kept my comments purposefully general and set them down only to provide a thumbnail sketch of the issues that are structuring and coloring my analyses. They include the historical, the psychological, the narratological, and the intersubjectivity of writing apocryphal texts.

The Historical: The Still Tender Shoots of Patriarchal Projects

In the historical perspective, I suggest, Buddhist authors' employment of patriarchal imagery has to be placed in the context of Indian and then Chinese societies, which, as Buddhism was being established in either place, were only gradually producing patriarchal families and the cultural infrastructure necessary to house patriarchal ideology. It is far too common to ignore the newness of patriarchal ideas and ideals, as well as the work that went into establishing patriarchal logic as self-evident. And in this kind of oversight we tend to assume that patriarchal families have always existed in the form that we recognize as "natural," but obviously the opposite is true.[45] Thus while we moderns may read the father-son motif in the *Lotus Sūtra* as completely normal and not worthy of comment, this sense of naturalness is only possible given a whole edifice supporting the identity-through-patriarchy position that presumably only recently appeared in human history and which needed careful maintenance throughout its development.

In considering these issues, Buddhism is relocated in historical processes but not simply as that religion that arose during the *śramaṇa* movement in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. when Indian society was apparently undergoing fairly extensive political and economic changes. Rather, Buddhism's fundamental notions of identity that are so insistently cut away from one patriarchal form and then attached to another are seen as innovations that had to be wrought from much less developed precedents. In this reading, the structuring of Buddhist identity that has so much to do with an elevated form of moral purity (beyond caste concerns), personal ownership of one's

45. Here I would like to thank Angela Zito, who, several years ago, urged me to think more carefully about this issue.

deeds, the closure of perimeters, adherence to public and universal law, the culpability of the agent over time, the conservation of moral deeds, and so on—a list of what we might call "deep structures" in Buddhist thought—are suddenly seen as stunning creations popping up on a historical field that had been, we assume, largely innocent of such sophisticated forms. In this vein, we can begin to write the anthropology of Buddhism's anthropology, which in part turns into a genealogy of Buddhist notions of genealogy.

Normally, we do not look at these elements that structure Buddhism's notions of truth, identity, and causality, and thereby we miss the richness of the Buddhist material with regard to the emergence of different styles of "selfhood." This leaves us with little material to make sense of issues concerning patriarchal identity, which themselves seem to have everything to do with purity, ownership, the closure of perimeters, public and universal law, and so on, as listed above. In addition to asking for a kind of Dumont- and Foucault-influenced sensitivity to the specific and highly variable forms of subject-construction, this position essentially pushes for a rereading of Buddhism in light of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals,* especially the second essay, which so brilliantly focuses attention on the work that went into getting humans to think of themselves as responsible, calculable subjects.

I suspect that when we do not approach Buddhist subjectivity with these questions in mind, we are unreflectively imposing our own modern forms of subjecthood on theirs, leading to a rather uncritical assessment of the material. In short, the historical perspective that I am briefly presenting here unhinges a singular notion of human subjectivity and asks us to recognize the ideological labor that was necessary to get Buddhist subjects to recognize themselves in such a way so as to consider it natural that they should "find" within themselves a jural identity cut off from all attenuating circumstances—what might be best defined as *a legally liable subject forever confronted by the law.* Key here is that I suspect that the general "shape" that Buddhist subjectivity came to take runs parallel to patriarchal forms of sonship: in either case the subject is confronted with enduring legal obligations that are engendered at the base of the subject before any particular subjecthood is installed. To read Buddhism without appreciating the newness of these formatting structures for the subject, which seem to have so much to do with patriarchy, is already to accept as immaculately produced the patriarchal subject-format that Buddhism relied on so extensively.

There is, in fact, another level of historical import that I believe is crucial to reading all Mahāyāna texts. Assuming that they were written several centuries after the death of the Buddha, we ought to assume that one of their primary concerns is to produce legitimate connections back to the founder of truth. Thus, in addition to the above perspectives of the emerging patriarchal subject, the historical moment when these texts appeared would have found ample use for any doctrine that could explain the reliable descent of

truth and legitimacy through fields of difference and distortion. Actually, given that the very act of writing might have been felt as a further step away from authenticity, we ought to read these texts with particular attention to their structuring of the reception of truth. By building this reception around a kind of reproductive reading of textual patriarchy, Mahāyāna authors turned necessity into a virtue, as textuality's initial pulse away from prior modes of authenticity was turned into the sole vehicle for recovering legitimacy.

The Psychological: Of Farms and Farmers

In appreciating the historical construction of the subject under patriarchy, we ought to give careful attention to how the construction of such an inheriting subject has to be conceived of as a presence completely separable from the surrounding matrix of "being." In this image, the ground of the subject is substantially and categorically different from whatever one wishes to call its opposite. Though Buddhists generally assert that there is no substantial self, Buddhist rhetoric urges that one believe in the field of the subject—a demarcated place of consciousness that the subject inhabits and which does not overlap with anyone else's consciousness. Of course, exchanges, such as merit transfers, are possible, but this is due precisely to this clear demarcation that makes such exchanges meaningful in the first place. Moreover, this field of the subject holds the singular karmic past of the individual in a hermetically sealed manner, making the field a kind of zone of history that somehow adheres *to* or *in* the agent of the field. In short, Buddhism requires that the subject come to think of itself as a troubled and polluted field that needs to be domesticated and purified of all noxious elements until it is, quite literally, a field of merit. This is, after all, what all the Buddhist metaphors of cultivation *(bhāvanā)* imply with the planting or cutting of roots, the sowing of seeds, irrigating, and so on.

The problem with this basic construction, though, is that the subject is both the field and the farmer of the field, a very interesting doubling of the individual into subject and object.[46] Whether or not one is ready to agree that this doubling is fundamentally impossible, we ought to note how this doubling fits together with the radical alienation of the subject. First, the

46. Nietzsche is again useful here, though much has been said by others, such as Lacan and Baudrillard, that is equally useful in thinking through this perspective. For Nietzsche's position on the impossibility of just this kind of subject, see *Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968); and *On the Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967). Useful comments by Lacan can be found in his "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," esp. pp. 45–59, and "The Freudian Thing," esp. pp. 131–34, both in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977). For Baudrillard, see his *The Consumer Society* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 129 ff.

very need for self-cultivation results from imagining a thorough divide between the subject and all other "external" realities in the sense that the field of the subject in Buddhism is understood to be an entity that can and must be liberated from a confusion with the defiling matrix of causality based on desire, ignorance, and hatred, elements that have no rightful place in the final field of the subject. Second, the field format of the subject requires some kind of double joint in the subject that allows for work to be done on itself, by itself, within its boundaries; this produces the ironic form "self-cultivation." Actually, these two positions fit together because the newly imagined field of the subject has to be purified once it is set apart from what it is supposedly not. In other words, drawing the line around the subject simultaneously made pollution a possibility and self-purification an obligation.[47] Though I am generalizing and though not all Buddhist discussions can be shown to assume this, it still seems basically true that in the Buddhist universe the mind is the only thing that *is not* ultimately made from something else, even if it arises conditioned by karmic causes. Thus mind is said to arise from a prior moment of mind, and thus remains a thing unto itself—essentially cut away from all other elements of being.

So, what might these images of the demarcated and radically alienated subject-as-pure-mind-waiting-to-be-purified have to with fathers and sons? Everything, I think. The notion of paternity works in a manner that parallels this image of the alienated pure subject that is different from everything around it and continues to be "itself" through time. Though it might be said that fathers make sons, the identity of either is based on the transmission of a selfsameness that never is produced by anything other than itself. Paternity moves forward in time by passing, unscathed by the mediating figure of the mother, from the father to the son, where it takes up residence and there remains untouched and uncompromised as a permanent and perfectly pure identity that will always be the "real" identity of that subject-son. Thus both models of identity—pure subject and inherited paternity—require locating identity within a circumscribed purity that is present before actual identity is formed, since both the Buddhist model of the field of the always-already present subject and the patriarchal model of an "essence" of the father within the son require the ability to posit an identity before any particular identity is visible, and in both cases this subject-before-being is the only "real" one.

I am quite aware that this juxtaposition of paternity and pure subjecthood might sound unlikely to some of my readers, so as an introductory comment let me say that there is plenty of evidence to think that Buddhist models of sonship blend standard Buddhist notions of the enduring subject

47. How close the Buddhist structuring of the pure mind parallels the dualistic Yoga of the Saṃkhyan variety does not matter for the argument but would be worth reconsidering.

with generic notions of patrilineal re-production in several interesting permutations. For example, texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* seem to make these two things one and the same: one's ultimate paternity is established in the final purification of the field of one's subjectivity—buddhahood. One's buddhahood, predicted by the father after the son recognizes the father as father, is that final moment of closure with the father when a field identical to his is manifested in a way that confirms the radical sameness that was imputed between father and son, even if that sameness was not recognized at first and even if it needed eons of purification to make itself fully manifest as the only real identity that anyone could have.

Transcendent Narration and Immanently Unreliable Narrators

The third perspective is that of narrative, in particular its close connection to positing sameness over time. Here we have to admit that Buddhist claims about the final identity of the subject, and its place in the Buddhist patriarchy of total sameness, as mentioned above in my reading of the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra,* are essentially dependent on narrative. In fact, it is narrative alone that allows for ideas of sameness in time. This problem deepens when we consider that narrative itself bears a very complex relationship to time: narrative gives the illusion of being in two places at once as it doubles time into "real" time that is supposedly observed *(fabula)* and narratized time that is the reconstruction of real time *(sujžet).* The hilarity of a narrative that fails in this regard is summed up nicely in Robin Williams's complaint that it takes him a year to remember a year.[48]

In this doubling of time zones, narrative produces a position of observation that appears to break out of time in order to gain an overview of things in time, thereby making the recognition of things in selfsame perpetuity possible. The problem is that this kind of narrative certainty-of-sameness, with its higher ontological position that observes and testifies to the sameness of the before and after, implies a kind of transtemporal fixity that again requires an impossible position outside of time. That is, narrative needs to watch elements in time and yet remain immune to fluctuations in its standards of observation as well as the equally bedeviling problems of confirming that it is recognizing sameness, a gesture that of course only works through repeatedly turning to a standard of sameness and knowing that each test case matches its predecessors.

In short, the narrative platform must appear to be able to hold its own nature over time as it views other items in time in order to judge whether or not *they* hold their selfsame nature. If narratives did not lodge themselves

48. From his *Live at the Met.*

outside of time, then by the time one had consumed a narrative about sameness, one might worry that in the intervening time, everything had changed. Reflecting on narrative's structural involvements with time, sameness, and fixity suggests there may be close connections between the form and function of narrative and patriarchy. Both narrative and patriarchy rely exclusively on generating this authoritative vision that seems to hover outside of time as it looks back into time to structure and legitimize fleeting things like subjects and their respective lineages.

On another level we might wonder if the act of narration is itself a practice that can legitimize itself only by assuming certain notions of a selfsame subject who consumes the narrative and who is responsible and reliable enough to treat it as one complete entity despite its fleeting temporal presence. This point might be inflected to say that narratives need a platform of stasis outside of time even as narratives, especially narratives of identity, are constructed just to establish this platform of stasis for the selfsame subject. One can see a perfect example of this in the account of the Buddha's enlightenment in which during the middle watch of the night he sees, from a transcendent atemporal perspective, the past, present, and future of all living beings. This total vision that narratizes, timelessly, all identity is then the basis of the Buddha's identity and the biographic genre that holds that identity together. He is, from that vision onward, narratized exclusively as the Awakened One with never a worry that his identity might shift again. Thus, in this case at least, narrative and the image of an abiding subject are mutually confirming.

Finally, narrative is that which allows for essentialization and, for that matter, the construction of any kind of identity. Identity, even in its most basic form, is a linguistic framing of a selected re-presentation of being, according to a set of recognizable criteria, to create the image of the true contents of a character that is ironically *its self.* We might even push on this to say that narrative always does what patriarchy and theories of the autonomous subject do: it attempts to isolate and preserve a pure image of the subject in time such that it is present and selfsame through various events. This boils down to the notion of the name, or more properly, the surname—the word that represents the selfsame identity of the being-in-time.

Without Within and the Intersubjectivity of Writing Apocryphal Texts

It seems clear that Mahāyāna literature, fascinated with itself as textual presence, must be read as the discovery of the new medium of textuality, a medium with all sorts of new powers and possibilities for interweaving truth, purity, and paternity. What has until quite recently largely escaped our attention in modern accounts of the emergence of the Mahāyāna is that

it seems closely connected with the discovery of writing and the subsequent ascendancy of the text.[49] As Yijing, the seventh-century pilgrim who spent at least twelve years in India, put it, "Respect for bodhisattvas and the reading of Mahāyāna Sūtras, that is what is called the Mahāyāna."[50]

In this shift to textuality, Buddhist truths did not simply get poured into texts from an earlier oral form. Though it is possible that some Buddhist texts represent the straightforward engraving of "oral texts" onto the page, most Mahāyāna texts seem to work otherwise, suggesting, rather unavoidably, that these texts represent the birth of creative authorship—the specific talent of an author to create an array of narrative figures who appear fully autonomous and self-animated as they "speak" their parts. Thus it makes sense to begin with the hypothesis that Mahāyāna Buddhism was generated, in part, through stealing the image of spoken truth and rendering it in written language in a particularly clever manner that did not dampen that nostalgia for orality and presence that were preserved intact, *on the page,* as writing disappeared as writing, leaving only a very odd form of "orality" in its wake.

This act of making written words seem like oral discourse required several types of sophistication, most of which can be called intersubjective. These techniques warrant careful attention if we are to understand the multiple layers of subjects, listeners, and viewers in a text like the *Lotus Sūtra.* First, the forging author had to create believable characters out of his own character; that is, he had to stop "speaking" in his own voice so that he could act as a ventriloquist for the Buddha and other magical bodhisattvas that he needed in his narrative. Second, and this seems more important, he had to effectively imagine how others were going to read his construction of identity in order to create a model that met those expectations. Thus, as an author writing in the voice of a stolen identity, he had to develop the talent of making the false look true in the sphere of public discourse, and this could only be won by being aware of readers' notions of truth and manipulating them accordingly. To do this, he had to place himself both inside and outside his document, writing his document so that it becomes what it should be only when others read it with completely different assumptions and reactions from his own.

Here we ought to pause and ponder the possibility that this has been the problem all along in reading Mahāyāna sūtras. We have read these texts not admitting that they were designed to be about us, insofar as we were antici-

49. Richard Gombrich did much to open up this avenue of reflection with his essay, "How the Mahāyāna Began," in *The Buddhist Forum,* ed. Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 21–30.

50. This passage is cited in Huburt Durt's useful essay on the Mahāyāna, "Daijo," in *Hōbōgirin,* vol. 7, p. 768.

pated readers whose desires and fears were carefully organized in the reading experience. Against this kind of suspicious reading, we tended to think that the texts were simply statements of truth and fact, having no view to the reception of these statements. Clearly, however, these texts are not just about buddhas and their truths but rather—and it is a huge shift in hermeneutics—about shifting what the reader is supposed to think about these images of buddhas and their truths. In short, in the Mahāyāna sūtras, the presentation of truth occurs with an eye to its reception, and thus "truth" is formatted, essentially, through imagining its effect on the reader.

To appreciate this skill, we have to imagine that the author sees the encoding of his narrative in terms of the specific effect it will have on an Other who is clearly not in his place, and should not be, since the reader is never to see the author as the basis of this discourse. Arguably, then, the author as father of an apocryphal text such as the *Lotus Sūtra* writes exactly opposite the style of reading that he is formatting, since not only does he write under the mantle of deception, even as his discourse is all about the law and "truth," he writes a treatise on finding identity that only works when its author's identity is erased. As I mentioned above, a discourse on universal fathers and sons works best when the actual progenitor of the discourse is excluded. Because of the timeless universality sought in these texts and because of their determined attempts to tie truth and identity together via sublime, transcendent patriarchs, dissemination of new identities via textuality was possible only with the total erasure of the local, finite father, the author of the discourse on fathers and truth.

On another level, by shifting to literary presentations, truth had to be presented as something to be desired as the text has nothing else to keep the reader reading. This effect can be considered the "solicitation" required by the medium of text; it must be kind and alluring to its reader, offering itself to the reader as the key to success and pleasure for otherwise it would die in the space between writer and reader. That the message ends up including lengthy praise of the medium seems to be a function of the medium's relationship to the reader: it can only live when it is given life by the reader, and thus it is always in a fundamentally obsequious position, even as it seeks different types of domination.

Learning to write truth-for-the-public in this deceptive manner requires a talent that could be imagined as parallel to the talent of carving seals or stamps, images that have to be cut in reverse. Everyone knows that you do not carve or write directly on the stamp; instead you draw or write always imagining in mirror image how your message will be read when it is transformed into its public sphere—on the envelope or letter or wall. Thus when the seal or chop is forged in the hand of the artist, its present visible form is always shaped by imagining its effect when, as template, the image takes its final form in turning itself outward to the public in repeatable gestures of

sameness. In a way, then, the carving of the seal represents meaning or images delivered into a temporary medium that has everything to do with part 2 of the act, the transfer of this image outward, when the perverted mirror image is righted in the eyes of the Other. Key here is the fact that the first cut is not justified until the second act of the transfer is effected.[51]

Equally interesting, the seal, as intermediary stage in the progression of producing a public image, is positioned as subject and object in the imagination of the author-artist. It is first object insofar as it receives the artist's imprint, but the very format of the objectification is structured so that it can turn to subjectify something else. In short, the seal is cut as a perverted or inverted object so that it can "speak" correctly on another medium—paper, wax, mud, or whatever. All of this happens, though, within the larger scope of the artist imagining how his audience is going to regard his printing process. Thus the author creates a tool qua text as a type of narrator in his absence, itself then arguably an author of sorts. This is no simple trick and encodes several types of intersubjectivity.

There is in this analogy between the seal and apocryphal literature another noteworthy parallel. The seal is designed never to show the intermediary process: it does not print so that both normal and mirror images can be seen. It works as a seal when you cannot see the seal in the image that it produces, and of course, the image never reveals the stem or handle that supports the face of the seal. In other words, the "reader" of the seal never sees what the "writer" of the seal sees since the reader remains uninvited into the process of inversion that created the printed object. I think the same thing can be said for the apocryphal sūtra. The author, like the stem of the seal, disappears behind the surface of his narrative, as the text is set up just so the reader cannot read through the words of the narrative to see the production of the text.

Moreover, it would seem that in texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra,* the reader is always referenced to other authorial figures in the text and never "down" or "around" them to glance at the author of these authors, in other words, the stem of the seal. Thus as the seal denies the reader a vision of the image's inverse qua father, so, too, the text denies the reader a vision of the text's puppeteer father, and this works best by creating images of other authorial fathers in the text who are to absorb this gaze that is looking for authoritative authors. At all costs the text must answer the question of its origin on its own field or surface, or it will rupture its authority and open up an endless investigation into what is *not itself.*

51. This delayed delivery of the reality of the presentation is fascinating in its own right but also echoes a number of other interesting phenomena, such as the way that a son is really only in a lineage when he fathers a son himself; that is, his sonship remains nascent until it is turned upside down in his repetition of the one that "carved" him.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is particularly fascinating for the way it gives the reader the impression that the surface of the narrative *is* being penetrated to reveal other layers of supporting one another and explaining, after a fashion, each other's stems-of-being. Obviously, this movement from surface to subsurface has the effect of guiding the suspicious reader into tracks of acceptance that resolve and neutralize his or her anxiety over the origins of the narrative. For instance, in the first chapter, the discourse begins by explaining its relation to older lineages of truth-speakers, a history that then cleverly returns us to the surface of Maitreya and Mañjuśrī who were just talking about the origins of the text. This is a little like cutting a seal that has within in its panorama a figure of a man cutting a seal. The difference is that the *Lotus Sūtra* as text shows other figures *talking* about the origin of their talking and never writing. Obviously, as long as the author's portrayal of the stem-of-his-narrative remains an appeal to the authority of orality, it turns out to be another kind of diversion.

It is perhaps unavoidable to think metaphorically, but it can be dangerous to build an argument out of metaphoric logic. I raise the example of the seal because it nicely illustrates how the discovery of a tool shifts the construction and reception of meaning and its potential for public dissemination. My point here is that we will continue to miss much about these texts as long as we ignore the fact that in the creation of the apocryphal text, authors learned to write in a reversed form that unavoidably created a metapresentation of language, that is, a language that no longer looks like what it came from. In sum, apocryphal writing in the newfound medium of disembodied text presented all sorts of possibilities for reinscribing truth and pure identity and simultaneously introduced different requirements for articulating the origins of these statements.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

In a general sense, focusing a reading of the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* on fathers and sons seems to have been fruitful and to have fit well with the material at hand on several levels. First, this motif covered much of the action in the first chapter, and it is the topic of resolution, the place where Mañjuśrī puts the doubt of the vision to rest, that sanctifying place where Mañjuśrī anchors the discourse in the lineage of prehistorical buddha-fathers who are the source of the discourse itself. Presumably, there would be no discourse if it could not find a set of fathers to back it up, and thus we ought to say that the word had to become father in order that there be words about fathers, and this seems to be the intent of returning to that perplexing lineage of twenty thousand buddhas whose demise initiated the *Lotus Sūtra* in a kind of jouissance of perfect, private material bursting out into the public, where it appeared as text, law, and a site of desire and replication.

Second, the father-son motif regularly demonstrated in nomenclature, such as the widely used "son of the Buddha" or, better, "*real* son of the Buddha," and the more specific "son of the Dharma king," the name given to Mañjuśrī. This sort of title is clearly a place of making meaning, drawing the reader into a process of reidentification and of course indexing the text's problematic relationship to earlier forms of Buddhist identity. Thus we ought to clarify that the bodhisattva figure is above all else a claim about the son's destiny of becoming the father through consuming discourses about fathers and sons.

Third, however we choose to categorize the sonship of the bodhisattva, we at least ought to acknowledge seeing everywhere in this first chapter the question of male identity in time—that is, male-being in need of joining with a paternal past that is *both in and out of time,* existing as that odd structure that fuses the past with the present in some always available, unmediated conduit of sameness. In the narrative, everyone needs a father, and the text itself is working, as I argued, to refather readers as they read about new conditions for being "*real* sons of the Buddha." Not to be lost here is that giving fatherhood to the reader only comes in the wake of the reader giving fatherhood to the text.

Fourth, analyzing this first chapter led on to a number of questions about literature and narrative in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It would seem that the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* is a prime example of a new model of Buddhist communication. The complexity of this new textual tool that appears potentially free of institutional frameworks is also manifest in the way it talks about itself, the way it grants authority and value to itself and to those that will accept it, and the brilliant manner in which it focuses vision on itself by creating internal landscapes that turn on themselves to view and evaluate their own beauty and power. To understand these complex maneuvers, we have to think more carefully about the rise of forged textuality in Mahāyāna literature and the attendant exchanges it requires from the reader, exchanges built around producing desire for the text, in the text.

3

The Domino Effect

Everyone and His Brother Convert to the Lotus Sūtra

AN OVERVIEW—THE RIPPLE EFFECT

While the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* developed an image of its legitimate history through doubling itself in order to explain its birth at the end of the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas, the chapters that follow prove the efficacy, and fertility, of the "text" on various internal audiences. In particular, chapters 2 through 6 create several layers of audiences that seem designed to control the reading audience that is now observing both the narrative action and its effects on the internal audience. At some points this triple-layered structure (action, narrated effect on internal audience, and hoped-for effect on the reader) functions simply to dictate the reader's appropriate response to the material being presented. That is, the narrative depicts how the narrative is to move from the realm of narrative into a supposedly Real zone beyond the concoction of language and narrative, and yet that zone of the Real is, of course, concocted in the narrative itself.[1]

In addition to directing the reader's reception of the narrative, this metastasis of audiences involves a more intricate play of subjectivities. For instance, there are several narrative moments where conversion to the *Lotus Sūtra* is promoted by offering the reader an image of himself as seen from within the text and, more particularly, as seen by the father-Buddha in the text. What this implies is that the reader's gaze is brought around so that he temporarily inhabits the father's gaze in order to see himself as object from the father's point of view, a conjunction of visions that seems designed to stimulate the reader in various ways. In essence, then, the text has turned into

1. For interesting comments on parallel structures in nineteenth-century French literature, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), esp. chap. 8.

something like a viewing machine: it seems to have "seen" the reader's gaze and manipulated it so that that very gaze comes to land on itself again but having gained that self-recognition by passing through the view of the truth-father. Of course, it is in this circuitous, Hitchcockian fashion that the reading gaze comes to "know" itself and finds itself refathered by the narrative.

Without a doubt the *Lotus Sūtra*'s penchant for relocating identifications and subject-positions is what makes analyzing the text both difficult and rewarding. My approach to these convoluted narratives is to identify the fields of action within the text and then to arrange them hierarchically by showing how various fields are presented to observing figures in other fields of action in the text. In building this topography of view and viewer, I pay close attention to what demands and desires are incited in that staging of action in one domain for its consumption in another. Thus I try to show how the *Lotus Sūtra* exploits the power of drawing and redrawing that enchanting line separating the viewer from the view, a technique that is most powerful when it is turned on the subject "himself," an act that objectifies the subject to himself in a tantalizing way that then is folded back into new forms of subjectivity. What is essential to inviting the reader into this reflexive self-apprehension is a certain excitement produced by suddenly being intimately in contact with the paternal authority that promises the reader that it has the power to shift identities, provided that the reader regards this paternal power as legitimately, and naturally, in charge of identities.

A VIEW OF ONE'S OWN VIEW

The power of paternal rhetoric to rebirth its recipients is amply demonstrated in the first action that follows the light miracle and the account of the twenty thousand buddha lineage. Here in chapter 2, "Expedient Means," there is the first half of the complex conversion of Śāriputra, a conversion that ripples outward, serving as the template for a series of other conversions in the subsequent chapters. Once Śāriputra's conversion is fully announced in chapter 3, "Simile and Parable," the narrative segues into the Burning House parable in which the Buddha as "father of the world" explains how he saves his deliriously inattentive sons. Then, still within a fairly economic plot schema, the outward pulse of the narrative is signaled in chapter 4 by the account of four well-known Buddhist monks—Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākaśyapa, and Mahamaudgalyāyana—who function as a chorus, jointly explaining how they found their own "real" Buddhist sonship in watching Śāriputra's conversion. In the course of explaining the effects of watching Śāriputra's conversion, they offer the so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son as a kind of reiteration of their own conversion experience.

After the elaborate Parable of the Prodigal Son who finally comes to iden-

tify with his awe-inspiring father after working for years in a shit-pit behind his father's mansion, the narrative's domino effect manifests itself in the Buddha's prediction that these four monks will achieve buddhahood in the distant future. After this sequence, which concludes in chapter 6, the narrative seems to lose some focus but continues to recount more conversions with more parables, including the conversion of Pūrṇa Maitrayaniputra, and then Ānanda, Rāhula, and then five hundred others. In this rippling outward of conversion through watching conversion, the progression seems to move from the core of old Buddhism, represented foremost by Śāriputra and the chorus of the four famous pre-Mahāyāna monks, toward the inclusion of more peripheral figures, including women. So, just in terms of form, the shape and pulse of narrative in the *Lotus Sūtra* as it moves through these early chapters looks something like the introductory chapter wherein private essences, such as the Buddha's light or that reproductive truth that had been encased in the clan of the twenty thousand buddhas, moved outward to touch an ever larger public who then turn toward that beneficent center in order to see the truth about themselves and Buddhism.

To make sense of this program for recovering "proper" Buddhist sonship and the perfect Buddhist destiny that it predicts, we need to keep three levels of sonship clear: (1) sonship for the figures in the narrative, (2) sonship for other observers of the narrative who are also in the narrative, and (3) sonship for the reader of the text. The trick here is to follow the progression in which a new version of Buddhist sonship is offered to observers in the narrative and then to the observing reader, both of whom at first find themselves external to this new form of sonship, yet nonetheless are invited by the father to "reclaim" it as their own. Viewing this stack of want-to-be-sons who convert by watching others convert, I think we have to say that action on each level always includes messages for the next level up. Thus, even at the simplest level of the Buddha talking to Śāriputra, there are coded offstage lines to the effect, "We, here in this small corner of the narrative, though talking to one another, are actually talking to you too." The "you" in this phrase, for instance, refers to the inhabitants of the next level of discourse, the four monks "watching" Śāriputra's conversion, but in fact, since we readers are also watching all that, the remarks percolate up to our level as well.

Equally complex is the way that conversion in even the smallest cells of narrative, such as in the conversion of Śāriputra, is also precipitated through the display of doppelgängers in which Śāriputra as the figure-to-be-converted is confronted with a hitherto unknown history of himself and that self's prior relationship to just this discourse. Thus, identity, as usual in the *Lotus Sūtra,* is generated through the play of narrative levels, with various subjects learning to renarratize their current existence and identity by accepting a grander plotline. As I argued in chapter 1, structuring desire-

for-identity in this longing manner is basically parallel to any patriarchal attempt to generate and control identity by getting participants to accept that narratives of patriarchal transmission accurately and, ultimately, describe the essence of identity, even as that essence has to be imagined as real and independent of the narrative that presents it.

Despite the ease with which information moves between these narrative levels to draw the subjects into the master plot of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the reader will find it impossible to place himself on equal footing with the figures in the narrative. The reader never hears his name spoken in the text, though the text claims to know his identity and hails by name the other reclaimed sons in the narrative. Thus the reader, alienated in the audience that watches the internal audiences, has to read about conversion as an unknown somebody, while all others are converted *personally,* and more, get to hear their future buddha-names prophesied by the Buddha-father. Thus we might theorize that there is an innate sense of incompletion for the reader who exists on an alienated plane far from being known on a first-name basis, as the other sons are.[2]

TEMPORARY SUICIDE

On a more basic level, the narrative develops new identities for all its actors through making them confront and overcome forms of self-alienation. From Śāriputra on, the text's leading actors are portrayed struggling to find a way back to a more authentic identity that has been identified as lost, though it is now reappearing within the perimeter of the father's discourse, a discourse, it turns out, that is primarily about just that progression of loss and reclamation. In short, Śāriputra's desire to be who he has always been is only motivated by the Buddha-father telling him that he has never been who he thought he was. This conversation leading to Śāriputra's spectacular reclamation of his "authentic" identity is all the more complicated by the fact that his two identities—real and false—are both marked by the epithet

2. Obviously, the text can never be about every particular being, those endless future readers, even as that is exactly what it wants to be. In offering a template for universal conversion, it is only Śāriputra and the other named figures in the text who get their identities squarely confirmed by the Buddha-father who knows that strange fusion of their particular beings, associated with their names, coupled with their singular transcendent universality, their Buddhist sonship, which he claims to have caused a long, long time ago and which he makes present again for them. Equally interesting, if we pay attention to the selection of figures to be converted, they seem largely to be those traditionally known to have been close to the Buddha, that is, those with whom he had a "particular" relationship, including not just high-profile monks but also his son, his wife, and his aunt. Perhaps, just as with the eight sons who are first refathered by the *Lotus Sūtra,* it is by reconverting these familiar figures that a kind of confidence in the "blind" universal applicability of the procedure is produced in the reader.

"son of the Buddha," with the primary difference being that he wins the true version by renouncing the prior version.

Arguably, then, this conversion process is predicated on a kind of temporary identity-suicide, a trope that appears in other early Mahāyāna texts for reasons that will become increasingly clear. The full complexity comes into view once we see that Śāriputra's break with authenticity is both produced and reconstructed by the narrative. In line with the general strategies of the *Lotus Sūtra,* getting Śāriputra to accept this replotting of his identity is legitimized by showing him, and the various audiences, that this current conversion is part of a much grander plot that he has, in fact, forgotten. Thus, as in the explanation of Maitreya's identity in chapter 1, the present is constructed as part 2 of a rhyme scheme that was initiated in a distant past that the Buddha is gradually if reluctantly revealing on this day at Rājagṛha. Hence, again parallel to the treatment of Maitreya, conversion and the reaffirmation of authenticity is effected in the plot when figures learn how to "reread" the basic plots of Buddhism. That is, the narrative requires that all the figures in the narrative perform the annulment of one plot (tradition as it had been known) in the excited acceptance of this new plot, which is delivered by the narratively nimble *Lotus Sūtra,* which actually contains these various plots, along with the accounts of how various actors move between them.

The call to trust these various orders of discourse so as to gain one's universal and authentic identity appears particularly attractive when the other sons in the narrative who commit themselves to these new plots are prophesied by the Buddha to become identical to him in some distant future. Thus converting to this new model of sonship comes with the exciting promise of finally becoming the father, that unthinkable closure of sameness in the family of sameness.[3] This, arguably, is the bedrock fantasy of patrilineal logic—forward reproduction via difference (the son is always different from the father because he isn't the father and because, in one way or another, he came from the father) is to end in total repetition of the essence or sameness of the patriline as the son becomes the father. Patriarchal reproduction for the *Lotus Sūtra* then is really just recapitulation that got temporarily lost before it found itself anew.

A NEW DIFFERENCE PROVES OLD SAMENESS

Although, in a general sense, these stories work to generate desire for inclusion in new Buddhist in-groups, held together by the promise of future

3. Western Buddhist enthusiasts are often heard exclaiming the wonders of Buddhism, which, unlike Christianity, actually promises that the neophyte can become the father. Why anyone, Indian or Western, might find this attractive warrants careful consideration.

sameness, and of course based on past sameness, there is also plenty of discourse that doubles and divides entities such as the Buddhist Law (big and little), truth (final and expedient), Buddhist identity (Mahāyānic and non-Mahāyānic), and nirvana (final and illusory). In reading about these doublings, one is led to see that real "seeing" is to understand the doubling itself, not just to focus on the new, larger, and more "ultimate" item, which, anyway, can only be "big" or "ultimate" with its lesser double onstage. This command to see newly created difference as the doorway to total sameness produces an interesting philosophic conundrum that I want to mention here briefly in advance of the full argument.

On one level, the staged conversations in these early chapters show that the *Lotus Sūtra* is constructed as a discussion about the truth of other truths that then takes itself to be the final truth. In this sense, the *Lotus Sūtra* establishes itself on a meta-level from which it judges other truth-claims and other claims to Buddhist success. In particular, it creates the category of Hīnayāna Buddhism, with its supposedly limited figures of the arhats, śrāvakas (lit. "Hearers"), and pratyekabuddhas, all of whom have yet to grasp their place in the larger matrix that the *Lotus Sūtra* is creating. Thus the *Lotus Sūtra* appears as a law about the law, or better, ideology about ideology, in which there is next to no content in the narrative other than the discussion of past discussions and the delineation of the proper response that ought to be accorded to this present discussion of past discussions.

In short, the *Lotus Sūtra* positions itself as a clearinghouse for organizing all prior Buddhist ideology and then takes that very gesture as the basis of claiming total value. Of course, this is simply another way of explaining the text's overall effort to replot the past and future of Buddhism. If there is one new startling piece of ideology in the text, it is simply that everyone is, and has been, a son of the Buddha and yet has never *really* been a son of the Buddha, and thus must rededicate himself to his primal family in order to properly take his place within the family identity, a gesture that will also include devoting himself to becoming a facsimile of the Buddha-father.

Though these two narrative ploys appear distinct—the involuted doubling of Buddhist sonship and meta-commentary on all prior Buddhist discourse—in fact there are good reasons for thinking that they are at least parallel and perhaps inseparable. For instance, real sons in the *Lotus Sūtra* come to acknowledge that their prior Buddhist sonship was small and limited, just as they learn that non–*Lotus Sūtra* teachings were limited and designed to be but warmups for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s ultimate teachings, even though the ultimate teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* is simply that the previously known versions of Buddhist teachings were limited and introductory. Thus the *Lotus Sūtra* is producing itself as a master signifier through a narrative presentation of the Buddha as a father figure who stands outside of time in

order that he may know all Buddhist discourses "in time" and who knows the ultimate sonship of his sons in a way that, when communicated, ruptures the coordinates of these sons' prior narratives, thereby lodging them, irrevocably, in this master narrative.

Explaining how this ideological effect is generated is the task of this chapter, a task made a little easier because we have seen parallel tropes in the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra.* By the end of this chapter the question, Why *this* in Buddhist literature? will be hard to avoid, and I will offer some speculation about why new sonship, built around devotion to the text itself and its parasitical master narratives, appears as it does in the *Lotus Sūtra.*

IT'S GOING TO TAKE FAITH: A CLOSE READING OF ŚĀRIPUTRA'S CONVERSION

At the end of the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra* there is a form of closure that establishes a foundation for the text's legitimacy and its claims to boundless value. After the historical Buddha had produced the miracle of pleasurable light and total vision, Maitreya and Mañjuśrī discussed the meaning of this display, thereby revealing the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas that stood behind this event, and behind the *Lotus Sūtra* in general. Then their discussion came back to explain itself, as Mañjuśrī revealed to Maitreya their past relationship, which, like their ongoing relationship, was constructed around the giving of the *Lotus Sūtra.* With these intertwined histories and foundational purities established, the historical Buddha comes out of his *samādhi* and begins to talk to Śāriputra about a new way to be Buddhist, and this is where chapter 2, "Expedient Means," picks up the thread.

Ironically, to induce Śāriputra's conversion and to set in motion the track of copycat conversions, the first thing the Buddha expresses to Śāriputra is that the wisdom of the buddhas is completely beyond the comprehension of those who are not buddhas. While this kind of hyperbole is not unusual in Mahāyāna sūtras and can be found even in non-Mahāyāna sources, here it seems to be working in a more pointed way. The ease of contact with the Buddha that was so evident in the first chapter has suddenly been replaced by a discussion that begins by announcing the Buddha's distance and inaccessibility. Whereas in the opening scenes of the text the Buddha had sent out the light of pleasure that touched all beings and brought their gaze back to him, and even granted them a facsimile of his own vision of the cosmos, here the narrative establishes a barrier that prevents all beings, Buddhist or otherwise, from entering the subjectivity of the Buddha. Thus an introductory discourse of solicitude and inclusion has been replaced by one of prohibition, but prohibition with a very seductive kind of allure. As the Buddha says, "The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable.

The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. Not one of the śrāvakas or pratyekabuddhas is able to comprehend it."[4]

The wisdom of the buddhas, even a small portion of their wisdom, is thus set beyond the ken of normal Buddhists, here identified with the pre-Mahāyānic titles, śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas. Presumably this comment is designed to be particularly off-putting as Śāriputra is identified, at least for the moment, as a śrāvaka, a simple Hearer of the Buddha's discourse. Thus the chapter begins with a discussion of the truths about the truth, which, in this introductory moment, is depicted as a place that can only be desired but never entered, at least in the state that the Buddha's interlocutor and reader initially find themselves. This prohibition will fade away because that sublime sphere of buddha-wisdom will shift from being completely unattainable to becoming inevitably inhabitable, provided that the reader and Śāriputra take this rhetoric as truth from the one who calls himself "the father of the world."[5]

The contours of eliciting desire-through-prohibition become particularly clear in the paragraphs that follow, as the Buddha explains to Śāriputra that since this wisdom is so unattainable, there is no reason for even talking about it. As he says, "But stop, Śāriputra, I will say no more. Why? Because what the Buddha has achieved is the rarest and most difficult-to-understand Law. The true entity of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between buddhas."[6] At this moment, the narrative within the narrative threatens to break off, complaining that communication is not possible given the immensity of the signified and the limits of the audience. Of course, the irony of an omniscient speaker making a mistake as simple as initiating an inappropriate topic is not broached in the text, and instead it seems that this posturing is designed to draw the reader into the narrative, entranced by the possibility of hearing about the things that the Buddha specifically wished to withhold from a general Buddhist audience. In short, this is quite a tease; a sublime object is flashed before the audience and then retracted in a way that heightens the reader's interest in the discussion of that sublime object, a discussion that will only continue when Śāriputra thrice beseeches the Buddha to continue.[7] In patriarchal terms, the text is

4. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 23 (hereafter cited as Watson); T.9.5b.25.

5. It is worth comparing this language with the terms used for Brahma in *Kevaddha Sutta,* in particular the phrase, "Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be"; for a translation, see Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 178.

6. Watson, p. 24; T.9.5c.9.

7. This moment in the narrative is particularly interesting as it suggests that the discourse on the law breaks one law (the Buddha thought this teaching was a bad idea) only in order to fulfill another, the standard Indian custom that one must offer whatever is demanded by

about to do exactly what it claims is impossible—informing sons about the state of the father.

In terms of narrative development, reading this temporary fence as yet another incentive to move the reader toward the narrative-father makes sense because the rest of the chapter moves along rather adroitly in its task of informing sons about the way their father sees things and, most important, about the way he sees his sons. In sum, despite this initial reluctance, the chapter informs sons about fathers who, it turns out, are completely fascinated with their sons, even if here at the beginning contact is postponed in a way that will be overcome through the son's desire for this very theory of fathers and sons. Or, more exactly, overcoming the son's resistance to be refathered is effected, in part, by showing him the father's resistance to doing this work, which the father fears will not be successful. By showing the son this kind of reluctant father, the son gains both a sense for the uniqueness of this dispensation and a sense of gratitude that the father took these steps to reach him.

But something else is going on that warrants careful reflection. As we just saw, the Buddha claims that old-style Buddhists, the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, cannot understand his wisdom and his truths, which he now is referring to as the Law *(fa)*, a title that seems to refer to the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, whose full name is the *Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law.* While this claim to have a truth beyond "normal" tradition is widespread within the confines of Mahāyāna rhetoric, on another level it represents a strange inversion of the relationship between knowledge and identity as it had been proposed in earlier Buddhist works. The typical pre–*Lotus Sūtra* position is that one *is* what one *knows,* and moreover, anyone can come to know total truth and thereby become a buddha. Thus someone becomes a buddha (an enlightened being) simply by becoming enlightened, making knowledge the producer of identity in a way that would not inhibit anyone's success provided that he or she had the patience for the eons of work required. Thus the achievement of truth is open to the public, who, once they achieve it, fully cease being their old private selves and step into this new buddha-identity.

Actually, the *Lotus Sūtra* will hold to this position of public truth for all beings, but it will replace the publicness of older Buddhist truths with the publicness of its own discourse, thereby making it impossible for the public to come to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s version of truth and buddhahood through any door other than its own narrative and textuality. In short, all prior Buddhist identities and destinations, public as they were, are annulled by making this

someone three times. Too, this legitimate illegality matches the way the introduction broke open the lineage of twenty thousand buddhas and pulled their essence into the *Lotus Sūtra* through applying the law of a lower order of patriarchy.

text the sole proprietor of the newly declared form of public Buddhist truth and sonship. Thus we have a complicated figure eight: accept the unexpectedly grand patrilineal truths of a text that obliterates your prereading Buddhist sonship, and you will have your limited sonship expanded to its infinite potential, a potential that the *Lotus Sūtra* will claim was already in place and just needed to be activated by this correct vision of the "real" relationship between father and son as uniquely defined by the *Lotus Sūtra.* This complicated interplay of reprivatizing public access to the public's final identity, and destiny, is clearly crucial to Mahāyāna rhetoric and is a topic that remains central throughout the rest of this book.

After having briefly explained the impossibility of communicating his wisdom to others, the author has the Buddha expound at length the immensity of the gap between normal comprehension and the Buddha's. Here we see a kind of hyperbole that aims to produce not just a wall of exclusivity around the sublimity of the Buddha's wisdom but also a kind of hysteria built out of mathematical exercises that, try as they will, can never jump from quantity to quality. For instance, the Buddha says to Śāriputra, "Even if the whole world were filled with men like Śāriputra, though they exhausted their thoughts and pooled their capacities, they could not fathom the Buddha's knowledge. Even if the ten directions were all filled with men like Śāriputra. . . ."[8]

In this long passage about the impossibility of sameness between the wisdoms of those like Śāriputra and Buddha, the text comes to closure around faith, for only faith can bridge this immense gap. We are told, "Toward the Law preached by the buddhas, you must cultivate a great power of faith."[9] Assuming that "the Law" here means the *Lotus Sūtra,* and this seems most likely since similar phrases follow, one is to have faith in the very thing that produced such a hysteria of difference between the reader and the sublime object that he will, in a short time, be expected to consider as his own essence and destiny.

BAD NEWS: A RECALL OF TRUTH

Once this has been said, the author turns to describe the public's reaction to this disturbing teaching, a narrative technique whereby he can orient and discipline his reader's reaction to his discourse. In the narrative, the Buddha's audience is a traditional Buddhist group of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, who, however, have yet to be regenerated according to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s program, and thus they are portrayed as perplexed and uneasy at discovering that they have, essentially, been left out of truth. They

8. Watson, p. 25; T.9.6a.2.
9. Watson, p. 26; T.9.6a.22.

say, "If the Buddha preaches but one doctrine of emancipation, then we too should be able to attain this law and reach the state of nirvana. We cannot follow the gist of what he is saying now."[10] In registering this dismay, the author is showing a typical Buddhist group, presumably devoted to prior Buddhist teachings, confronting a discourse about a new law and dispensation that excludes them. In fact, these Buddhists are hearing that they do not have the essence of Buddhism—truth—which is now located out there in some unattainable sphere of buddhahood that they cannot reach, or at least cannot reach until they submit to this new discourse about the new law.

Evidently the text is attempting to deracinate traditional Buddhists who, until they came across the *Lotus Sūtra,* thought they were fully legitimate in their Buddhist identities. As Śāriputra says a few lines later, everyone is now in doubt about his or her identity, achievements, and wisdom. After exclaiming how wonderful it is that "at long last you preach this Law *(shi fa),*"[11] Śāriputra goes on to catalog the darker side of this new dispensation:[12]

> The arhats who are without outflows and those who seek nirvana now have fallen into a net of doubt, wondering for what reason the Buddha preaches this. . . . Among the assembly of śrāvakas, the Buddha has said that I am foremost, yet now I lack the wisdom to solve these doubts and perplexities. Have I in fact grasped the ultimate Law, or am I still on the path of practice? The sons born from the Buddha's mouth press palms together, gaze upward and wait.

Śāriputra closes this question with the motif "sons born from the Buddha's mouth," making clear that for our author Buddhist sonship was an older, established trope that Śāriputra could be imagined to have employed even as he speaks from within the group of older, unregenerated Buddhists whose inclusion in the "accomplished" Buddha family has now been revoked. Obviously, this piece of the discourse works to upend all Buddhists, since if Śāriputra, as "foremost" of the assembly, is not included in this newly revealed Buddhist family, then no one else can feel secure in his Buddhist identity. In fact, it is no accident that the text begins its series of conversions with Śāriputra, for, as leader of the Buddhist community second only to the Buddha, he is emblematic of authority in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Despite allowing Śāriputra this nod to previously established Buddhist sonship, the following exchange distances pre–*Lotus Sūtra* Buddhists even more. In this conversation, the author seems to have wished to construct the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* as an event parallel to the Buddha's first teach-

10. Watson, p. 27; T.9.6b.4.
11. Watson, p. 27; T.9.6b.14.
12. Watson, p. 28; T.9.6b.21.

ing after his enlightenment, as it was known in pre–*Lotus Sūtra* Buddhism.[13] Setting up this structure implies that resistance to the *Lotus Sūtra* is just like resistance to Buddhism, with the consequence that Buddhists who resist the *Lotus Sūtra* are tagged as non-Buddhist, something that will be said explicitly in later passages. In this passage, the Buddha thrice resists giving the teaching of the Law, saying that there is no point to it as everyone will be shocked and doubtful, and yet Śāriputra insists that some will in fact be able to have "reverent faith" and in that gesture gain reentry to the Buddhist fold. Thus, implicitly, the narrative is allowing that though perfect communion with this Law might not be possible, faith is, and that will be enough. Śāriputra, in fact, induces the Buddha to preach based on just this promise of faith: "The countless members of this assembly are capable of according reverent faith to this Law."[14]

Thus after the prior passages had pulled the rug out from under the feet of Buddhists who had been quite sure that they were good Buddhists, the next passage moves into explaining the characteristics of gaining reentry to the fold as a very rare thing indeed, as rare as the flowering of the udumbara flower: "The Buddha said to Śāriputra, 'A wonderful Law such as this is preached by the buddhas, the Tathāgatas, at certain times. But like the blooming of the udumbara, such times come very seldom. Śāriputra, you and the others must believe me. The words that the buddhas preach are not empty or false.' "[15]

In addition to emphasizing the rarity of the moment, and thus the urgent need to accept it, the author has the Buddha exclaim that those who reject this discourse of deracination are "the monks who are overbearingly arrogant [and who] will fall into a great pit."[16] Obviously, these comments leave no room for honorable opposition to the text and its reconstruction of Buddhist identity. In later passages in this chapter of the sūtra such resistant types will be threatened with gruesome hells and a future bereft of all contact with buddhas. With these statements, devotion to this Law, and by implication the entire text, is vaunted as the most important of Buddhist gestures, and, conversely, denigration of this text becomes the greatest of sins.

The charge of arrogance seems important. For the moment these resistant monks are not accused of being stupid—this will be said soon enough—but at this crucial first contact with an explanation of their de-

13. Interpreting this scene as a recapitulation of that aspect of the Buddha's biography is supported in the next round of verses, which specifically tie back to that sequence; see Watson, p. 42; T.9.9c.4ff.

14. Watson, p. 30; T.9.6c.28.

15. Watson, p. 30; T.9.7a.15. I think a survey of pre-Mahāyānic writing would show that this metaphor of the udumbara flower is usually homologized with the appearance of a buddha, not with a teaching, as it is here.

16. Watson, p. 29; T.9.6c.17.

racination, they are shown unable to accept a demotion. In terms that the text will develop shortly, these monks cannot let go of one transcendent sonship for another. And, as we will see, the primary difference between these two sonships, in addition to the way that the Mahāyāna version is predicated on the overcoming of the prior one, is that the Mahāyāna version requires becoming completely the same as the father—possessing a facsimile of his body, speaking his words, knowing exactly what he knows, and so on. The earlier version of Buddhist sonship simply included knowing a part of what he knew and accepting his law as the only true guide to life.

In other words, prior Buddhist sonship was generated in accepting the Buddha-father as disciplinarian and guide who dispensed particular information about reality, information that induced the recipient to leave his home-father to strike out to discover a facsimile of what the Buddha had realized, thereby winning the title "son of the Buddha." Clearly, the *Lotus Sūtra*'s version of sonship works on a meta-level vis-à-vis the prior form of Buddhist sonship. In this new form there seems to be two distinct elements: first, as demonstrated in the above passages, the son must renounce his prior Buddhist sonship; second, he must accept the discourse that effects this demotion as his primary object of devotion, a gesture that will effectively rebirth him and grant him, again, the title "son of the Buddha." By requiring this rebirth sequence, the *Lotus Sūtra* is essentially taking on the role of the actual historical Buddha and thereby generating a doubling of truth-fathers, a mimesis that can only come with a parallel doubling of sons.

Thus, in terms of other content, the Law that is so regularly mentioned as sublime and yet totalizing will remain vague and unarticulated, and instead, it seems set up as an ill-defined part of the paternal package that claims to know that mercurial dyad of truth and identity and dispenses it to those who take seriously such paternal claims to know truth and identity. The catch is that of the two, truth and identity, truth seems rather hard to find or to distinguish in the discourse, and the contract between the reader and the text instead fixates on the question of identity. Thus truth as some kind of content slides from view, leaving the focus on "pure" identity, which is won from worshiping the discourse that claims to be in charge of dispensing pure identity through knowing, not surprisingly, the truth about pure identity.

To sum up this initial scene, the *Lotus Sūtra* is re-creating Buddhist identity in a way that requires the nullification of prior forms of Buddhism, even as those prior forms are recapitulated in a process that expands them, universalizes them, and, ironically, reprivatizes them as the unique property of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, Buddhism, as it was known, is accepted on one level because there are monks and nuns, and so on, but this Buddhism is accepted in the understanding that that formation lacked the very thing that Buddhists value most in Buddhism—truth. Thus this scenario hollows

out pre–*Lotus Sūtra* Buddhism and then narrates how this deserted form of Buddhism is to receive, for the first time, what it thought it already had in its possession—final truth. In this progression of taking-from-in-order-to-give-back, our author replays familiar Buddhist narratives, such as the Buddha's resistance to teaching, the motif of the rare blooming of the udumbara flower, and the established motif of "son of the Buddha," even as he ruptures their prior sanctity.

This rhetoric temporarily empties tradition of its content, just long enough so that traditional figures can feel sufficiently debased to be envious of receiving that content back again, with this second infusion enlivened by the memory of overcoming or executing the prior version and a desire to come to new contractual terms with the fatherly force that enacted this sequence. Of course, this entire process is articulated from the point of view of the Buddha who is poised as the figure in charge of the master signifier that defines what is and is not Buddhism and who, from the very beginning of the chapter, defines himself as one who knows the higher plot behind the various forms of Buddhism. As the Buddha says of buddhas in general: "He has realized the Law that is profound and never known before, and preaches it in accordance with what is appropriate, yet his intention is difficult to understand."[17] Thus, clearly, the speaking Buddha in the plot claims that he is the master of the master plot, and moreover, he is the master of the subplots that tradition had mistakenly taken to be final.

PERILOUS RESISTANCE

The stakes are raised in this overhauling of Buddhism when our author chooses to demonstrate the rift that he is generating in the Buddhist community. In a rather spectacular moment, five thousand monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who had been in the audience at Rājagṛha get up and exit.[18] This is explained as due to their "roots of sin" and their arrogance, and in particular, because "[w]hat they had not attained, they supposed they had attained, what they had not understood, they supposed they had understood."[19] With this turn, our author has preempted the reader's disengagement from the narrative, for now not only has the reader learned of this new

17. Watson, pp. 23–24; T.9.5.b.29.

18. *The Questions of Kāśyapa* also has a parallel passage explaining the exit of five hundred arrogant monks. See *The Sūtra of Assembled Treasures,* in *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra,* ed. Garma C. C. Chang (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), pp. 406–8. This passage is also notable for an extended discussion of Buddhist sonship, see pp. 397 ff.

19. Watson, p. 30; T.9.7a.9. The assessment of past sins based on current rejection of the discourse goes hand in hand with the glorious pasts that are "given" by the text to those who accept it.

Buddhist truth, he has "seen" how the Buddha "sees" these supposedly arrogant Buddhists who cannot tolerate the temporary demotion of their identities that this text is requiring of them. Furthermore, the author has the Buddha declare that their exclusion from real Buddhism is actually good because they were inessential and untruthful: "Now this assembly of mind is free of branches and leaves, made up solely of the steadfast and the truthful. Śāriputra, it is well that these persons of overbearing arrogance have withdrawn. Now listen carefully and I will preach for you."[20]

What follows is most curious. With the internal audience pared down to those trunklike ones ready to accept this discourse as true, the author has the Buddha pronounce a global explanation of all Buddhist teachings in all time. In this exquisitely singular moment that opens up to evaluate the teachings of all times it turns out that despite what might have been said at different times by different buddhas, all the buddhas' teachings were given, and are given, for one sole reason—turning sentient beings into buddhas in accordance with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s notion of this process. I consider the details of this position below, but first let me note that what the author really is doing is offering an overview of Buddhism. By giving his narrative-Buddha this overview, the author has created a speaker who is the oxymoronic particular-universal, the sole one who, at this precious moment in Buddhist history, claims the right to pass judgment on all Buddhist things, even other buddhas and their deeds. Thus this discourse has jumped to a level where it takes all other Buddhist discourse as object and resists being an object to any other discourse but its own.

Also, it is clear that this discourse is not a teaching on emptiness, compassion, or the nature of reality; it is a teaching about teaching and therefore essentially a polemic on a level on which other polemics are treated not as content claims but as positions that should only be evaluated vis-à-vis this meta-level matrix that is articulated and made available for comprehension at this one precise moment.[21] In short, all other teachings were not, quite literally, what they were about, and thus the *Lotus Sūtra* is introducing itself as the Rosetta stone for reading all other teachings.

Moreover, this right to explain the deeper, unknown import of all other Buddhist discourse leads into the claim that the final telos of all discussions turns out to be singular: all buddhas, no matter what they actually said, simply were intent on turning sentient beings into buddhas, even if no one

20. Watson, p. 30; T.9.7a.12.

21. Thus, the *Lotus Sūtra* is not debating what was truthful in pre-Mahāyāna discourses on impermanence, for instance, it is debating the telos of teaching. I wonder if the question of containment doesn't also work for the odd way that the One Vehicle temporarily houses the Three Vehicles, the last of which is itself in the eyes of the lower two, who are none other than temporary versions of itself, as seen in its own eyes.

knew this at the time, and even if it looked like they were doing the opposite. Thus all Buddhist discourse has been appropriated by this discourse which enslaves it as a refraction of itself and marks it as a series of perversions produced merely to accommodate the context in which they were given. As the Buddha says, "Śāriputra, the buddhas of the past used countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of sentient beings. These doctrines are all for the sake of the One Buddha Vehicle."[22] Of course, there is a bit of danger here, since by postulating "countless numbers of expedient means," the narrative is generating a reliable narrator who explains that he and other buddhas like him are not always reliable narrators in the sense of being trustworthy for teaching what they really mean to say.[23]

The development of this master-plot position again forecloses resistance to the text but in a way that also strips the reluctant reader of his Buddhist identity. The Buddha is made to say that all Buddhist teachings belong to the One Vehicle, which is to be understood as the vehicle by which bodhisattvas turn into buddhas. According to this logic, all Buddhists, and all beings for that matter, are bodhisattvas, even if they do not yet understand this. This position is pushed to the extreme when the Buddha says, "Śāriputra, if any of my disciples should claim to be an arhat or a pratyekabuddha and yet does not heed or understand that the buddhas, the Tathāgatas, simply teach and convert the bodhisattvas, he is no disciple of mine, he is no arhat or pratyekabuddha."[24] This rhetoric works to secure the reader's devotion by threatening to take away all other prized Buddhist identities if this rhetoric about identities is not accepted. And, more ironically, one can keep one's old Buddhist identity, such as being an arhat or a pratyekabuddha, only in the context of knowing that it is provisional, since the only legitimate identity is a bodhisattva, the one who knows that he must become identical with the father.[25]

This distillation of knowledge and identity continues in the passage that follows as the wisdoms that had been accorded to figures like arhats, wisdoms that presumably would have been about emptiness, meditation, and reality, are redirected so that the wisdom of these beings ought to be knowl-

22. Watson, p. 31; T.9.7b.4.

23. This problem will recur much more clearly in the chapter on the Burning House where the Buddha will be accused of lying.

24. Watson, p. 33; T.9.7b.27.

25. We might assume that once a discourse like this has been spoken, no identity is really secure. Even the *Lotus Sūtra* can now be Lotus Sūtra-ed with the critique that it isn't the final truth but simply an expedient means for some other larger program. However, the first cut is the deepest because it charges that truth could take the temporary form of a lie, and it is this mixing of the pure and the impure that marks the *Lotus Sūtra* as so radical.

edge *about* arhats and how they are part of this larger Buddhist narrative of the One Vehicle. As the Buddha says, "Why do I say this? Because if there are monks who have truly attained the status of arhat, then it would be unthinkable that they should fail to believe this Law."[26] Consequently, according to the text's logic, if you claim to have realized anything sublime in the prior Buddhist system, it can only be knowledge of the sublimity of which this text speaks. The section concludes with the author having the Buddha speak more directly to his befuddled Buddhist audience, commanding belief: "Śāriputra, you and the others should, with a single mind, believe and accept the words of the Buddha. The words of the buddhas, the Tathāgatas, are not empty or false. There is no other vehicle, there is only the One Buddha Vehicle."[27]

This prose section is followed by a long verse in which the author has the Buddha skewer the opponents of this discourse. Whereas the prose section only mentioned their pride and roots of sin, here we discover that naysayers of the *Lotus Sūtra* are really evil Buddhists: "They fail to see their own errors, are heedless and remiss with regard to the precepts, clinging to their shortcomings, unwilling to change. But these persons of small wisdom have already left; the chaff among this assembly has departed in the face of the Buddha's authority. These persons were of paltry merit and virtue, incapable of receiving this Law."[28]

This last line opens up two interesting possibilities. First, apparently what these people are really guilty of is rejecting this discourse, and once they simply "receive this Law," then their other shortcomings will be redeemed: one's history becomes a function of a current relationship to a text that claims to know history perfectly.[29] And, second, in a kind of Catch-22, they are rejecting the law about their identities that could change their identities, and all because they have bad identities, an accusation that would at first fit Śāriputra, and the others that stay too, but it does not fit simply because these figures will be held onstage and made to convert, thus proving their "innocence."

This Catch-22 is actually illusory according to the text's logic; we will see that, despite this temporary exclusion, resistance ultimately is not possible. The *Lotus Sūtra* reveals a new version of the Buddha who claims to be the father of all sentient beings, and thus the identity of each creature is already

26. Watson, p. 33; T.9.7c.4.

27. Watson, p. 33; T.9.7c.7.

28. Watson, pp. 33–34; T.9.7c.14.

29. This crime of rejecting the text, or "this Law" as it is termed here, will get played up extensively in the chapters to come. In fact, it becomes hystericized as an ultimate crime with ultimate consequences. Thus, as usual in a sin system, the greatest sin is to doubt the discourse on sin.

predetermined, even if the creature resists this form of the father, and his call to return "home." In creating this timeless textual father, fatherhood is positioned so that it reaches past the resistance of the son, the son who can never know what happened at the beginning of his being, to explain the son's history and to explain the equally important reasons for his failure to accept that real history, along with the inadequacies of any other identity structure. Thus, as the text claims for itself the prerogative of this all-seeing transcendent fatherhood and then distributes legitimate sonship to those who accept that original paternal claim as legitimate, there is this radical divide between those who accept that they have already been preemptively marked by this father and those that do not. Those that allow themselves this identity via-the-father-in-the-text go on to imagine their destiny of becoming completely the same as he; those that do not, remain to be converted to their "primary" identity and set on the path of achieving sameness. Moreover, faith is of the essence since within this paternal structure that claims to know the deepest past, there is no way for the normal subject to get a full look at itself as subject, and thus it forever must rely on the discourse of true-identity that issues forth from what appears, actually, as the only true subject—the Buddha-father as found in this narrative. Clearly, narrative, father, the Buddha, and legitimate subjectivity are collapsing into one position.

Before leaving this section of chapter 3 that has so forcefully inserted itself into older forms of Buddhist legitimacy, we should note another perplexing problem in positing the *Lotus Sūtra* as the master signifier vis-à-vis older Buddhist discourse. First, clearly, the author wants to include all Buddhists in his project of the One Vehicle leading each and everyone to buddhahood through the worship of just this discourse on the One Vehicle. However, he seems aware that in making this claim, he is going to produce a rift in the community, and thus he prepares a narrative that explains and incorporates this resistance to the discourse. Though on one level he can recover these naysayers into his plan of singular universality—sooner or later they will figure out that they are to become buddhas in accordance with *Lotus Sūtra* logics—at this crucial moment of showing the reader what happens if he rejects the *Lotus Sūtra,* the text can only pile up threats of punishment and exclusion. This strategy is particularly poignant insofar as it quite literally demonizes all identity-claims made apart from the *Lotus Sūtra* and promises to punish these claimants with exile in hells and in places where one will never meet a buddha. In short, it is the familiar vengeance of a supposedly compassionate rhetoric-of-inclusion looking beyond its perimeters to say, If you are not for us, you're against us, and will be forever, even though *we* know you are our brother.

Ironically, then, despite the fact that the text has praised buddhas for

being completely endowed with the skill of preaching exactly what is most useful, this particular discourse of the Buddha on just the scope and intent of these preaching skills produced dissent and (temporary) exclusion from the One Vehicle. Presumably, the author prepared in some measure for this problem by having the Buddha demonstrate his reluctance to give the teaching in the first place, and thus we can blame Śāriputra for demanding a teaching that was to drive such a wedge through the community, as it was presented onstage. In fact, throughout the rest of chapter 3, and then again in chapter 4, the author gives much attention to the problem of the sons' resistance to being "replotted" by this new version of the father that unerringly knows the final subjectivity of all subjects.

Despite the language of seduction and solicitation that we will see deployed to foster this devotion to the new master plot, there is an abundance of aggressive rhetoric too, especially in the verses that recapitulate the Burning House parable. The meanness of this rhetoric is already quite obvious here, midway through chapter 2, where the Buddha explains Mahāyāna motivations:[30]

> For those of dull capacities who delight in the little Law, who greedily cling to death and birth, who, despite the innumerable buddhas, fail to practice the profound and wonderful way but are perplexed and confused by a host of troubles—for these I preach nirvana. I devise these expedient means and so cause them to enter into Buddha wisdom. Up to now I have never told you that you were certain to attain the buddha way. The reason I never preached in that manner was that the time to preach had not yet come. But now is the very time when I must decisively preach the Mahāyāna.

Here we see the author vilifying those Buddhists who had been interested in normal Buddhism—the search for nirvana beyond life and death. Their pursuits are denigrated as temporary projects offered to them in light of their dullness, greed, and ignorance. The full radicalness of demeaning old-style Buddhism and its supporters comes at the point when the Buddha declares that what he is saying now, he never said before, or at least, not in this lifetime, that is, the presumed scope of the listener's memory. In short, the little Law that he had given to satisfy the childish seekers is to be surpassed by the great marvelous Law, the Law that is this text itself, "The Sūtra on the Lotus-like Miraculous Law."

This is a double-jointed moment in the text when the meta-level strategy of the *Lotus Sūtra* is clearly discernible. The past is what it is because of what is being said now, but the current discourse is really only a commentary on the past since there is no real new dispensation other than to speak of the

30. Watson, p. 34, with minor changes; T.9.7c.28.

limits of what had been spoken before—that is, to explain the telos of all other prior telos. Thus the *Lotus Sūtra,* whether it calls itself simply the Law or the discourse on the One Vehicle, presents itself as that Thing that is always present "behind" whatever else is going on in any particular Buddhist moment, and behind any particular Buddhist truth-discourse. In effect, then, the *Lotus Sūtra* is refathering Buddhism as it asserts that it is the master narrative of identity behind a deceptive mirage of temporary identity that can and should be overcome when that mirage is denigrated (as maternal origins would be denigrated in a lay family) and replaced with a higher form of identity won through devotion to the narrative structure that delivers it and magically jumps one over a more obvious source.

The nature of this meta-level in the discourse becomes clearer and more interesting when the next section explicitly turns to the topic of "sons of the Buddha," a topic that will be central for much of what follows in the next two chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra.* Just after the passage above, the Buddha says:[31]

> There are sons of the Buddha whose minds are pure, who are gentle and of acute capacities, who under innumerable buddhas have practiced the profound and wonderful way. For these sons of the Buddha I preach this Sūtra of the Mahāyāna. And I predict that these persons in a future existence will attain the Buddha way. . . . When the śrāvakas and bodhisattvas hear this law that I preach, as soon as they have heard one verse, they will all, without doubt, be certain of attaining buddhahood.

This passage deserves careful reflection. To begin with, "sons of the Buddha" in the first phrase is not well defined. Because this term has been used several times already in the text, with and without the bodhisattva implications of having been rebirthed by the *Lotus Sūtra,* we would have liked some clarification. This vagueness, though, may be intentional, and represents a slide by which old-style Buddhists, here referred to as śrāvakas, are promised, alongside bodhisattvas, final success once they are touched by this text.[32] By saying, "When the śrāvakas and bodhisattvas hear this law that I preach, as soon as they have heard one verse, they will all, without doubt, be certain of attaining buddhahood," it seems likely that the text is taking itself to be that which makes one a real son of the Buddha, regardless of what identity one brought to the text. Though the passage explains that the text is taught specifically for "sons of the Buddha," we can assume that this includes Śāriputra, who is receiving the teaching along with everyone else onstage, none of whom has been identified as bodhisattvas in any other sense than by the implication that all Buddhist discourse, according to the

31. Watson, p. 35, with minor changes; T.9.8a.8.

32. This slide appears throughout the text in other scenarios, see for instance, pp. 134–35.

Lotus Sūtra, is just for "converting bodhisattvas," a term that clearly just means "sentient beings."[33]

Arguably, this is a fine example of the way the text demands a kind of temporary suicide of the reader in order that he be reborn into a transtemporal identity that was always present even though it was only accessible via this execution, which, it turns out, was never a real execution as there was nothing there to remove other than the deluded pride that took his prior identity as real. This cycle works because identity is always nothing more than "taking something to be one's identity," and thus the execution of one identity, even as it is simply the execution of misapprehension, is still an execution that can be accomplished with notable effects. The only way that this cycle can appear to be more than a sequence of discourse-shifts is to have the new self-apprehension appear to hook into something independent of the circle of self-apprehension, a *substance of identity,* in other words.

As we have seen, Śāriputra keeps putting his old identity "son of the Buddha" out for confirmation. What comes back in response is a discourse that legislates that he can only hold this title if he converts to this very discourse that will ensure that he is a son of the Buddha—but only insofar as he accepts that he has not really been a son of the Buddha until now, even though, on another level, he is also reassured that he has always been a son of the Buddha according to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim about primal universal sonship.

A TEXTUAL SORT OF INSTITUTION

In light of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative in these crucial early chapters, it is clear that the text is trying to supplant the prior forms of Buddhist identity that had been controlled and dispensed by the monastic institution. Father-son rhetoric seems to have been in place in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism for explaining the induction of monks into their new familial order, and thus one had, in earlier forms of Buddhism, become a son through monastic initiation and through accepting the legitimacy of the rule-bound community. Conversely, in the *Lotus Sūtra* one's reading experience supplants other ritual and community activities as the doorway to one's final identity and its destiny in liberation. Moreover, the *Lotus Sūtra* promises a kind of magic in which contact with just one of its verses will ensure that the reader-listener, now newly aware of his transcendent sonship, will be transformed into the

33. Ironically, then, for the new Buddha family to be made universal and unavoidable, the superior identity of the bodhisattva had to be split into a degraded and as yet unredeemed form, and the other, its opposite. This issue of degraded bodhisattvas returns when we see bodhisattvas included with the group of dumb, greedy sons who need to be tricked out of the burning house with the promise of toys.

father. Arguably, then, just in terms of the progression of forms, the *Lotus Sūtra* did to Buddhism what Buddhism did to the family: it borrowed a metaphor for identity from the very template from which it sought to distinguish itself.

In considering this kind of literary coup that claims to offer a restoration of legitimacy and identity, the topic of perduring sameness appears paramount. In fact, in the passages that follow the above quote there are three types of sameness engaged, and it turns out that they converge. First, there is the sameness of teaching, in which, as explained above, whatever was said prior to this moment was ultimately consonant with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s program of the buddhification of all beings. Here there is a matrix of sameness in which difference always resolves into the sameness of a final telos. Second, there is the sameness of all phenomena that, according to the *Lotus Sūtra,* are all already nirvanized, that is, in a state of quiescence and truth. Thus, "All phenomena from the very first have of themselves constantly borne the marks of tranquil extinction."[34] This is said in the context that there is no nirvana to be achieved as had been thought according to pre–*Lotus Sūtra* teachings. In a way, by making the ontic level already perfect, the text has moved the terror of samsara up to the level of belief or nonbelief in this text. That is to say, there is nothing to achieve other than accepting this rhetoric that there is nothing to achieve, and the terrors of samsara are visited on those who reject this move, a threat quite evident throughout the verse section on the Burning House parable that follows.

The third level is the most explicit one and ties the other two together. In the stanzas at the end of chapter 2 there are a number of bald statements asserting that the purpose of all Buddhist teachings is to turn sentient beings into buddhas. As the Buddha says, "Śāriputra, you should know that at the start I took a vow, hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us, and what I long ago hoped has now been fulfilled. I have converted all living beings and caused them to enter the buddha way."[35] This statement is quite rich. First, it is clear that one of the driving issues of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the program to get readers to believe that their destiny is to occupy the very place of buddhahood, that very place that was curiously withheld at the beginning of the chapter. Thus we might posit something like a "rhetoric of equality" in which the Buddha is offering total sameness to those readers who will renounce whatever distinctions (monkhood, arhathood, etc.) they had held dear. Of course, this rhetoric of equality also comes with a sharp edge along which those who reject the discourse are excluded from being Buddhist or moral and are threatened with eons of punishment and darkness.

34. Watson, p. 37; T.9.8b.25.
35. Watson, p. 36; T.9.8b.4.

Second, it is interesting that all this has already happened, a motif that is expanded quite extensively in the next chapter. All new knowledge will be presented as the remembering, or the recapitulation, of what was already known, said, and done many times in the past. Here the author seems to want the Buddha to position his fatherly relationship with the reader as a fait accompli. The Buddha is saying that he has already established all beings such that they have only one destiny—to become the same as he. Thus, there is really no place to hide; one has been fathered in a distinctive and unavoidable manner, and, consequently, one can only set out to complete the second part of the bargain. Awareness of the sonship seems, then, less of a gift and more of a command to fulfill the identity of sonship by transforming it into a replica of the father. Referring to the *Lotus Sūtra* again as "the Law," the Buddha says several lines later, "If there are those who hear the Law, then not a one will fail to attain buddhahood. The original vow of the buddhas was that the buddha way, which they themselves practice, should be shared universally among living beings so that they too may attain this same way."[36]

Here, as usual, the rhetoric works by creating a buddha-narrator who knows the subject better than the subject knows himself. The narrator speaking in the voice of the Buddha is positioned as one who knows what has happened throughout all time. Moreover, he knows the contents of each sentient being's mentality. And last, he knows that he has done something to each one of them that makes their destinies singular—they will become facsimiles of him even though this act of predestination and its consequences are unknown to them. Most interesting in all this is the rider that this movement toward ultimate closure will only begin working if each of these subjects accepts this history into his interior. Thus, again, the Buddha is positioned as the one who knows the master plot, yet this master plot only begins to function with the cooperation of the subject who renounces any other plot and accepts this master plot as fait accompli.

Given the close ties between this master plot and a refurbished version of sonship, we should ask, What role does this sonship play in constructing this literary hijacking of the Buddhist tradition? The first thing to note is that it is transcendent in the sense that nothing can change it. It is a presence that is unaffected by time and by events and, of course, even by the subject's own response to his identity. Thus sonship is this magical phenomenon that bridges not just time and space but identities as well. Every sentient being will occupy any number of positionalities, but this sonship will remain and will be the enduring identity that will finally come due in closure with the father who generated this "seed of buddhahood," as it is called.[37] The radi-

36. Watson, p. 41; T.9.9b.3.
37. Watson, p. 41; T.9.9b.9.

cal faith in the unchanging nature of this seed is quite the opposite of the usual Buddhist discussion of the emptiness of subjecthood; actually, it will turn out that the *Lotus Sūtra* will allow that this seed can be destroyed but only by rejecting the theory of the seed—the *Lotus Sūtra.*

Of course, later in the Mahāyāna tradition there would be plenty of discussions that attempted to identify this sonship with the very emptiness of each sentient being's identity, so that the very lack of a fixed character becomes the basis of being the ultimate character, the Buddha. In the *Lotus Sūtra,* though, there is no such sophisticated reasoning on this point. Sonship remains simply that bridge over time and being that grants the possibility of future salvation based on past engendering. Furthermore, this sonship remains dormant and ineffective until the subject accepts the narrative of his sonship. Thus it is that the Buddha is shown exclaiming the power of this text—for once this text successfully penetrates the subject, revealing the reality of transcendental sonship, there is nothing in the way to prevent the subject rejoining the father in shared sameness. Looked at this way, though the text does not want to admit it, the past engendering of sonship, however that is imagined, is only really fertilized by the narration of that past in the present, and this is why the text ends up playing the role of finalizing sonship.[38]

The most compelling proof of the discourse's notion of its own special power to activate prior sonship is that the narrative demonstrates, many times, just this effect that it has on its internal audience. In fact, the next four chapters will be extended discussions of how Śāriputra and other old-school Buddhists come to accept this discourse and thereby "recover" a sonship that they had in prior relations with this father figure. Even before these conversion narratives are offered to the reader, we see the effect of this discourse on "sons." Near the end of the long verse at the end of chapter 2, we find the following passage:[39]

> Śāriputra, you should understand that persons of dull capacity and small wisdom, who are attached to appearances, proud and overbearing, are incapable of believing in this Law. Now I, joyful and fearless, in the midst of bodhisattvas, *honestly discarding expedient means,* will preach only the unsurpassed way. When the bodhisattvas hear this Law, they will be released from all entanglements of doubt. The twelve hundred arhats, they too will all attain buddhahood.

38. Though the text wants to position itself as the primary "magic wand" to fructify previously established sonship, it is also the case that these verses list a number of other acts of devotion—building stūpas and painting Buddha images—that are also defined as setting the practitioner on the Buddha Way leading to buddhahood. The problem is, though, that these deeds aren't "capable" of this until the *Lotus Sūtra* declares it to be so, again showing that "causality" ultimately resides in the theory of causality.

39. Watson, p. 44 (emphasis added); T.9.10a.16.

In this passage, in addition to the usual ad hominem attacks on those who resist the text, the author has shifted the identity of the audience who, instead of simply being monks, nuns, and so on, as they were introduced at the beginning of the chapter, now are called "bodhisattvas." Thus those who had been initially cast as out-group to this discourse are now declared in-group simply from having been in contact with this discourse, thereby subtly demonstrating the magic that the discourse promises to work on the reader. In short, those Buddhists who had been all wrong about their Buddhist identities, and quite perplexed to learn of their errors, as demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, are suddenly granted their new, legitimate Buddhist identities as bodhisattvas and promised full closure with the father figure who incarnates truth and being. This special dispensation is made clearer with the line that the Buddha is now "honestly discarding expedient means," showing that this is the final narrative. Several lines later, the finality of this moment is underscored as the Buddha says something nearly identical: "You, Śāriputra, and the śrāvakas and bodhisattvas, you should understand that this wonderful Law is the secret crux of the buddhas *(zhufo zhi miyao)*."[40] Thus the old category of being Buddhist is getting nudged into the new one, and this is the secret of the buddhas, here becoming a rather open secret as it finds its way into public discourse via this supposedly public teaching at Rājagṛha, and the text.

With this in mind, it becomes much easier to go over the chapter again and pick out the numerous times the narrative has the Buddha say, "I employ only the single vehicle way to teach and convert the bodhisattvas." It is the phrase "convert the bodhisattvas" that now makes more sense. After all, there is a redundancy in this phrase: if bodhisattvas are sons of the Buddha headed for their own buddhahood, what need would there be to convert them? This overkill is resolved when we recall that the text wants to define all beings as sons of the buddha, and thus bodhisattvas by nature, even though they have not yet converted to this idea, which, when they do, will allow them full access to their identity. In short, it is that Catch-22 problem again: one can only gain one's "prior and final identity" by accepting a discourse on one's prior and final identity. And it is just because the text insists on this prior sonship that bodhisattvahood gets doubled into (1) a generic form applicable to all beings and (2) the refined form that is reserved for those who believe the rhetoric about these two forms. Thus, as the text moves along, Śāriputra and the other Buddhists are gradually going to leave their pre–*Lotus Sūtra* identities, śrāvakas, and become the bodhisattvas they have always been.

40. Watson, p. 45; T.9.10b.7.

NOW I KNOW WHO I'VE ALWAYS BEEN

Chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sūtra* follows chapter 2 closely. It opens with Śāriputra, having just heard the Buddha's long verse on the One Vehicle at the end of chapter 2, erupting in joy and amazement. He says:[41]

> Just now, when I heard from the World Honored One this voice of the Law, my mind seemed to dance and I gained what I had never had before. Why do I say this? Because in the past when I heard a Law of this kind from the Buddha and saw how the bodhisattvas received prophecies that in time they would attain buddhahood, I and the others felt that we had no part of the affair. We were deeply grieved to think we would never gain the immeasurable insight of the Tathāgatas.

By concocting Śāriputra's response in this form, the author positioned chapter 3 as the effect of chapter 2. Chapter 3 "personalizes" chapter 2, demonstrating the way that the discourse on conversion in chapter 2 ought to be experienced when it is incorporated by the listener-reader who is to respond as Śāriputra is responding.[42] This process of incorporation then ripples outward into wider public spheres, since the singularity of Śāriputra's response leads to the more generic response of four other traditional monk-figures in the fourth chapter and then out further into the five hundred disciples.

The narration of Śāriputra's conversion is fascinating, first because the author works at evoking Śāriputra's internal dialogue and second for the way that the author uses Śāriputra's vision to confirm the ideological program of the text. In short, the author is getting Śāriputra to give a earnest plug for the author's program by narrating his before-and-after relationship to his Buddhist identity. Of course, for modern readers this kind of testimony looks much like standard advertisement: find a contented product user and have him give first-person testimony about the value and efficacy of the product in a way that looks honest, uncontrived, and, most important, unmotivated.

Śāriputra begins his testimony by describing a kind of obsession he used to have. He used to wonder why the Buddha was converting him with only the Hīnayāna teachings. As he says, "I have constantly lived in the mountain forest or under the trees, sometimes sitting, sometimes walking around and I always thought to myself, Since I and the others all alike have entered into the nature of the Law, why does the Tathāgata use the Law of the Hīnayāna to bring us to salvation?"[43] This positionality is obviously not straightforward

41. Watson, p. 47; T.9.10c.1.

42. This narrative strategy matches the one used for bringing the generic account of the light miracle into Maitreya's own experience. See the discussion in the preceding chapter.

43. Watson, pp. 47–48, with minor changes; T.9.10c.4.

for it implies that Śāriputra, installed as he was in non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, still knew about this other, bigger kind of Buddhism that he desired intensely but could not enter. Furthermore, it is just this gap of prohibition between his little Buddhism and the Mahāyāna that produced such longing in him, a longing that ultimately overcame the gap. In other words, the problem and its solution mingle since separation, difference, exclusion, anxiety, and so on, were needed before unity, inclusion, and joy could be offered.

In this sequence, we see Śāriputra as one who at first did not understand why there were these divisions in Buddhism and found himself apparently excluded from the form of Buddhism that he desired most—the Mahāyāna.[44] Today, however, he suddenly has received the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the Great Law, and in this moment he has gained a bridge into the Mahāyāna, a moment that both confirms and denies these divisions in Buddhism in a very interesting manner. Up until this point of conversion, his Buddhist identity was rent between thinking he was a proper Buddhist—"I and the others all alike have entered into the nature of the Law"—yet feeling incomplete and excluded. If we were to draw a Venn diagram of this situation, Śāriputra is within the larger circle of Buddhists but not in that shaded inner circle of bodhisattvas, those who have converted to the *Lotus Sūtra.* The rest of the chapter will explain how he moves into that inner circle, but it turns out that this movement isn't a movement at all but a conversion of perspectives that radically reconfigures his vision of the circles so that the inner circle expands to swallow the surrounding circle, which it claims to have been equivalent to all along, even if Śāriputra and the others saw it differently.

For Mahāyāna identity to swallow all other Buddhist identities, Śāriputra has to renounce the finality of his prior identity as a monk and see it simply as a step on the way, an expedient means, which never had any closure to it all. Shifting sonships in this manner, though, means that Śāriputra's Hīnayāna level of sonship suffers what sonship should never suffer—retraction. However, this annulment of sonship comes only through its expansion into a higher form of Mahāyāna sonship, a sonship that explains that the prior temporary form actually was part of the final form, even if that was not clear at the time. Thus the execution of one form of sonship comes to confirm that lower form as a necessary step leading up to the higher form. Clearly, then, we have a form of sublation: one sonship dies or goes under and, in that very loss, is recovered at a higher level from which it can understand its past, including its "death" and rebirth.

The rebirth aspect of this conversion is not left unclear. Śāriputra is made

44. Describing Śāriputra as one who was already "looking" at the Mahāyāna and wanting to be "in" it slyly implies that though this might look like new teaching, it was already around exciting and attracting Śāriputra.

to exclaim in a following passage, quoted already in chapter 2, that his conversion is really a second birthing:[45]

> But now I have heard from the Buddha what I had never heard before, a Law never known in the past, and it has ended all my doubts and regrets. My body and mind are at ease and I have gained a wonderful feeling of peace and security. Today at last I understand that *truly* I am the Buddha's son born from the Buddha's mouth born through conversion to the Law, gaining my share of the Buddha's law.

Obviously, Śāriputra is reborn into pleasure, security, and a full sense of his identity as a son of the Buddha. The darkness around his exclusion from the Mahāyāna has been overcome, and all his doubts and regrets have been removed. In short, in a moment of jouissance, Śāriputra finds his father and finds that his father had been doing nothing but looking for ways to bring him "home" in order to give him what has always been his—his patrimony in the form of his "share of the Buddha's Law." Thus this conversion story presages, in rough form, the story of the Prodigal Son that will follow in chapter 4. What is problematic is that this rebirth cannot really be a rebirth but must be a remembering, since it is essentially the acceptance of a prior condition, an already established connection between he and his father.

In this conversion moment, pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism looks like a detour that was both necessary and lamentable. Śāriputra explains that he followed this detour thinking that it was the final road, and it was just that assumption of finality that was so painful for him. As he says:[46]

> But the fault is ours, not that of the World Honored One. Why do I say this? If we had been willing to wait until the true means for attaining Unsurpassed Enlightenment was preached, then we would surely have obtained release through the Mahāyāna. But we failed to understand that the Buddha was employing expedient means and preaching what was appropriate to the circumstances. So when we first heard the Law of the Buddha, we immediately believed and accepted it, supposing that we had gained understanding.

This passage introduces a number of provocative positions. First, there is a kind of blame to be expiated. Why, after all, did the detour of the Hīnayāna have to happen? The answer is that truth had to take a temporary form in order to reveal its final form and that this dip away from the final teaching was a function of the greed or impetuousness of Śāriputra and all the others. Making this claim introduces the anxious situation of truth and falsity getting mixed together. The anxiety of this mixing is brought to the surface in Śāriputra's consequent musings over whether the Devil Mara might today

45. Watson, p. 48 (emphasis added); T.9.9c.11.
46. Watson, p. 48.

be incarnating in the image of the Buddha in order to trick him with this Mahāyāna rhetoric. As Śāriputra puts it in the following verse form:[47]

> At first, when I heard the Buddha's preaching, there was great astonishment and doubt in mind. I thought, "Is this not a devil pretending to be the Buddha, trying to vex and confuse my mind?" But the Buddha employed various causes, similes, and parables, expounding eloquently. His mind was peaceful as the sea, and as I listened, I was freed from the net of doubt.

In this very curious twist, the author can only have Śāriputra forget his anxiety of a Devil-in-the-Buddha's-guise by focusing on the form, style, and effect of the Buddha's delivery. Presumably the content of this Mahāyāna teaching—that old Buddhism isn't really Buddhism, and anyway isn't true—sounds too disturbing to be accepted strictly in terms of content and therefore can only be brought to heel in view of its delivery and its effect on the listener. Thus form and function are relied on to secure the dialectic of "executing" one Buddhism to produce another. Presumably, truth-as-content must pass through this securing conduit of perfect elocution to rearrive in the position of truth, for content has been too radically upset.

All these worries are brought to closure by the Buddha's response to Śāriputra's testimony. First, the Buddha affirms that there really was no killing of old Buddhism as Śāriputra, like Maitreya of the introduction, actually has been a Mahāyānist for eons and has simply forgotten this prior identity and the teachings that constructed it. The Buddha explains:[48]

> In the past, under twenty thousand million buddhas, for the sake of the unsurpassed way, I have constantly taught and converted you. And you, throughout the *long night,* followed me and accepted my instruction. Because I used expedient means to guide and lead you, you were born in the midst of my Law. Śāriputra, in the past I taught you to aspire and vow to achieve the Buddha Way. But now you have forgotten all that and instead suppose that you have already attained extinction (nirvana). Now because I want to make you recall to mind the way that you originally vowed to follow, for the sake of the śrāvakas, I am preaching this Mahāyāna Sūtra called "The Lotus of the Miraculous Law," a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the buddhas.

With these words, the Buddha as father tells the son who he has been in a dark distant past that the son no longer has access to, save through the narrative of the father, whose memory appears flawless and in no need of third-party verification. In short, this is a full replotting of Buddhism, as it had been known, and of Śāriputra's identity, as he and his companions had conceived it. Thus Śāriputra's preconversion anxiety about being left out of the

47. Watson, p. 50, with minor changes; T.9.10a.19.
48. Watson, p. 51 (emphasis added), with minor changes; T.9.11a.10.

Mahāyāna is completely annulled, since now that he has accepted this new plot of the history of Buddhism, his earlier identity is seen as but the effect of a great mistake, a great forgetting that now can be seen for what it is. In effect, then, there was really nothing at stake in Śāriputra's conversion; it was simply a coming home to the place he had always been.

Of course, the narrative's causal sequence does not suggest that Śāriputra's revelation is produced in the manner of calmly discovering that he had been home the whole time. In fact, Śāriputra can only hear these comforting words once he has converted, which, at least from his point of view, seemed like a willful act that he could have failed in and which brought with it no small measure of unease and incertitude. By generating Śāriputra as a figure who performs this kind of conversion to the narrative, we readers come to understand how the vision of an outsider looking distrustfully at the Mahāyāna is finally brought within the Mahāyāna, first by the explanation that resistance to the conversion—thinking you had closure when you did not—is itself part of your long path of entrance into the Mahāyāna (the detour that will lead back to its source) and second by the dual confirmation that one had always already been in the Mahāyāna and that this conversion was really only necessary because one had forgotten who one had already been. In sum, the conversion appears most attractive in its offer to essentially do nothing to the recipient-readers other than put them where they have always been, marking the advent of the Mahāyāna and the *Lotus Sūtra* as simple techniques for gaining what had always been present. Setting up conversion within the trope of always-already means that the *Lotus Sūtra*'s rewriting of the plot of Buddhism disappears as something new as it absorbs itself back into the "historical" narrative that it created for itself.

If we faithfully read this account of Śāriputra's conversion as an actual historical event, as the text demands, then we readers are learning that converting to this deeper or more transcendent sonship, and the narrative that supports it, comes through unhinging the subject from its prior Buddhist narrative, based on his current life in which he converted to Buddhism and the monastic community, and replacing it by "rejoining" him to a much larger narrative of eons of bodhisattvahood that the Buddha alone can give back to the convert-son. In short, the plot of the *Lotus Sūtra* is again showing how it is no more or less than the account of Buddhists renouncing one plotline for another, a progression that is offered to the reader so that he or she will make a similar shift.

The Buddha's depiction of Śāriputra's forgotten eons of bodhisattvahood as "the long night" is telling. Presumably this period of Śāriputra's career is cast here as darkness only vis-à-vis the present, where Śāriputra's amnesia prevents the absorption of this past into his persona; on its own terms, it presumably was good, that is, well-lit, bodhisattvahood. On another level, we might suppose that this newly revealed history is presented to

Śāriputra as dark and impenetrable because the process of conversion is effected by producing the idea of this darkness at the core of his notion of himself, a hole that is explained and clarified by the transcendent overview of the Buddha who knows the plot of Śāriputra's self-narrative as radically limited and essentially blind.

In effect, we have here the haunting implication that darkness and home are actually coterminus, for home qua family is created by generating that black hole back at the origin of the subject and then filling that hole with an ostensibly trustworthy narrative that resolves these problems once its language is taken to be an accurate account of being and time. Here, Śāriputra's past of darkness is being filled in with that sublimely resistant internal identity of Mahāyāna sonship that is now partially illuminated and reappropriated via a relationship with the father figure who can see where the son cannot see, and alone can give to the son what supposedly has always been his, provided he takes this history of his being to be a history of the Real and not just seductive rhetoric.

Revelation of this hitherto unknown grand plot continues in the following passage as the Buddha explains the other half of Śāriputra's transcendental sonship, his future. He will, in some far-off future, become a buddha himself, at which time he will get all the titles and privileges that the speaking Buddha has, though he will have a different name, "Flower Glow." Moreover, Śāriputra will get his own Pure Land, stocked with fantastic jeweled items and so on. More important, and the rhetoric plays this up, Śāriputra will get a host of bodhisattvas to work on. He will be a father, then, in the fullest sense of the word as he will have sons under him whom he must turn into facsimiles of himself.

At the end of Śāriputra's fatherhood in this Pure Land, he will prophesy his replacement, and a bodhisattva named "Firm Full" will come to buddhahood and continue the patriline. At the end of the passage, Śākyamuni Buddha leaves no doubt about this continuity, explaining how the buddha reigning during that era will say, "This bodhisattva Firm Full will be the next to become a buddha. He will be named, Flower Feet Safely Walking, Tathāgata, arhat, samyaksambuddha. His buddha land will be like mine."[49] With this prediction a full cycle of fathering has been established. The first son, Śāriputra, was turned into a father, and then his fatherhood was confirmed in his production of a son who is essentially identical to the first father, Śākyamuni. Three is the magic number here, as it takes three generations for a track of paternity to be confirmed in transmitting sameness, for the first son has to become a father in the image of his father, and this requires that he make a son just like his father.

49. Watson, p. 52; T.9.11c.8.

This moment of prediction closes out the action of the third chapter (the entire exchange is again treated in verse, though) and is capped with a description of the audience's reaction to the prediction of Śāriputra's future buddhahood. All the gods and other beings in attendance expressed their joy and "danced without end."[50] And then, in an unexpected gesture, all the beings offer the Buddha their upper robes, and these robes hang in the air of their own accord and then begin to dance too. Thus Śāriputra's joy in rediscovering his "deeper," or more historically extensive, relationship with his father again is seen to ripple outward, affecting all those who are watching—a father and son reunion that creates total pleasure in the public sphere that the text has created for itself. Moreover, joy moves from the singularity of their relationship to the public in such a powerful way that it causes inanimate yet intimate objects like their robes to express the same kind of celebration. The robes, as the most decent thing worn next to the body, are offered to the center, the Buddha, and in crossing over that line of private and public, receive this abundance of jouissance born of the new closure of father and son that animates them as magical facsimiles of their previous owners.

One final thing is said by these observers that is worth noting. All these heavenly beings, like a great choir confirming the factuality of the moment, declare that this teaching is the second turning of the wheel, the one that follows the first one at Varanasi, which pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism would have held as unique. Here the heavenly chorus says, "In the past at Varanasi the Buddha first turned the wheel of the Law. Now he turns the wheel again, the wheel of the unsurpassed, the greatest Law of all."[51] This comment seals the teaching in two ways. First, the choir establishes an independent platform of observation for the Buddha's actions and thereby can confirm that the Buddha taught this particular teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* after other teachings, in particular, those doctrines that he preached at Varanasi whose existence and historicity no one would deny outright. Then, by calling both occasions "turnings of the wheel," this memory delivered by supposedly neutral beings brings legitimacy to this second teaching moment by making it appear as a repetition, at least in form, of something held to be traditional. But even with this modicum of sameness established, the choir exalts the supremacy of this second turning, "the greatest Law of all."

REPRODUCTIVE METAPHORS

My concern with doublings, metaphors, and sonship is actually a little closer to the text than might appear. As the Buddha is made to say over and

50. Watson, p. 54; T.9.12a.10.
51. Watson, p. 54; T.9.12a.15.

over, the main thing that is so special about this new dispensation of Buddhist teaching in the *Lotus Sūtra* is that it is chock full of similes, parables, and metaphors, all of which are heralded as the means for bringing listeners back to the Real, even as these parables are presented as nonhistoric and therefore essentially fanciful, according to the text's rules for the Real. Thus I think we ought to ask if there might in fact be some connection between metaphors and sonship, topics that just in terms of coverage are getting the lion's share of attention in this early, foundational part of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

What is key here is the point that though sonship is not treated as merely metaphoric in the text, still it is the case that sonship and metaphors share the same basic structure of applying the reality of one entity across time, space, and causality to another entity that is to receive a dose of sameness through the linguistic structure that connects them. To be a son is to be half of a metaphor or analogy that moves between a father-template and its subordinate Other. Moreover, to come to an understanding of oneself in this form of recovering-the-paternal-rhyme is exactly the task that this chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* set for itself, a task that it accomplishes by offering metaphors, similes, and facsimiles of the process.

Thus I suggest that we recognize that there is a mirror between cause and effect in these father-son stories and the cause and effect that the narrative determines for the reception of these stories. That is, as Śāriputra and the other old-school Buddhists receive these parables about lost sons finding their lost fathers, they in fact find their own lost fathers, just as the narrative intends the reader to do as well. The problem, as mentioned above, is that sonship is a metaphoric form to begin with. Thus, according to the logic internal to the narrative, metaphoric teachings (for instance, the Parable of the Burning House) produce metaphoric beings, in the form of legitimate sons (Śāriputra and all the others), provided that those beings learn to receive the metaphoric teachings as indicative of the Real. Moreover, this process in the narrative is clearly portrayed as an analog for the reader's own reception, thereby adding yet another level of metaphor and transference: readers rediscover their own sonship by reading about how beings recover their lost sonship by hearing parables about other lost sons finding their way back to *their* fathers. Of course, recognizing this layering of narrative and legitimate reproduction makes it necessary to acknowledge that the actual father onstage is the narrative of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which, for the various audiences that it constructs for itself, in and outside of itself, promises that faithful acceptance of its payload of father-son material will correctly father the recipient.

The author leaves little doubt about the power of the metaphor and simile and closes out this scene with the Buddha telling Śāriputra that the

doubts of the audience will be dispelled once these teachings are clarified with similes and parables:[52]

> Did I not tell you earlier that when the buddhas, the World Honored Ones, cite various causes and conditions and use similes, parables, and other expressions, employing expedient means to preach the Law, it is all for the sake of highest enlightenment? Whatever is preached is all for the sake of converting bodhisattvas. Moreover, Śāriputra, I too will now make use of similes and parables to further clarify this doctrine. For through similes and parables those who are wise can gain understanding.

Given the value the text places on metaphoric formulations as the key to truth, it would seem that, as with culture in general, the final rule of the *Lotus Sūtra* boils down to this: take this signifying system as the legitimate reflection of the Real beyond the signifying system, and you will recover that Real and your place therein. Apparently, then, as the author of the *Lotus Sūtra* deftly replotted the well-known plots of Buddhism that he presumably received from tradition, he has on some level come to terms with the fact that his entire system of signification, as well as any other, is metaphoric insofar as it pretends to stand in for the Real that it is supposedly directly depicting. Moreover, he has, as the above passage suggests, decided to weave that understanding into the very content of his signifying system by unabashedly presenting his account of the Real *as* metaphor, even though he promises that those who learn how to take metaphors seriously will recover the Real: "For through similes and parables those who are wise can gain understanding." As we will see more clearly in a moment, the text's treatment of these metaphors, similes, and parables is far from straightforward and suggests a level of ingenuity and flexibility with language and truth that one rarely posits for ancient writers.

For the moment, though, let us not miss that the trick in revealing the power of metaphors is that they are spoken by a truth-father whose fatherliness, according to the narrative, is not metaphoric but strictly historical, or better, strictly Real in some undefined and unannounced manner. Thus in the account of the demise of the lineage of the twenty thousand buddhas, there was nothing metaphoric: real buddhas made real buddhas, and it was never implied that this was but a linguistic or metaphoric arrangement. Moreover, in the case of the eight sons, with the last being Dīpaṃkara, the traditionally recognized progenitor of Śākyamuni, we were given a form of the truth-father that was specifically underwritten by a domestic paternity that again appeared completely unmetaphoric. Thus standing directly behind Śākyamuni is a tract of truth-fathers, who though only appearing in narrative, seem poised to provide the reader with the impression that their

52. Watson, p. 56; T.9.12b.9.

paternity as truth-fathers, and thus their right to traffic in metaphors that induce sonship, is decidedly a Real phenomenon and not simply the effect of language. Thus it is only because the Buddha *really belongs* to a Real History of fathers and sons, as vouched for by Mañjuśrī in the introduction, that he can confidently provide others with fabricated parables of fathers and sons in order to bring them into the Real and their Real sonship.

Thus, though the author has the Buddha partially reveal the superstructure of the author's own narrative efforts, that revelation is completely sanitized by making the Buddha into the "author" of the text: it is the Buddha who is generating these various similes and metaphors, and thus though one catches sight of the techniques for producing sons with language, those techniques come sanctioned as the linguistic acts of the sole paternal authority who can be trusted for conveying the final meaning of the plot and the final reality of sonship within that plot. Or put otherwise, the similes and metaphors *of* sonship *for* sonship come from one who is a Real father in some inexplicable and unmetaphoric manner. The Buddha's fatherhood of all sentient beings remains paramount, and though this "deep paternity" is announced several times in the narrative, it is never explained. Moreover, the Buddha's paternal being also involves knowing the Real in some direct and unmetaphoric manner even as that knowledge of the Real serves as the basis for choosing indirect, metaphor-based techniques for seducing listeners into the Real. The tension is that the techniques that the Real, unmetaphoric father uses to regather his sons are always advanced slightly askew—being announced as metaphoric and provisional—even as they promise to bring the audiences directly into the correct apprehension of True History and their own True Being. Thus, though it is regularly misunderstood in modern accounts, announcing traditional Buddhism, and even the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra,* as "but metaphor" is not to say that the whole system is becoming ironic. Quite the contrary. The very act of defining Buddhism—in whatever form—as metaphoric is based on creating and assuming a nonmetaphoric form of authority and paternal identity.

Lingering here is the fundamental tension in patriarchal claims to truth and being. As I briefly explained in the introduction and chapter 1, what is holding this rhetoric together is faith in that impossible collapse of the *narrative* of/from the truth-father into the *being* of the truth-father in a manner that has to remain immaculate, non-narrative, and certainly not metaphoric. Arguably, if the narrative allowed the reader to know that the father figure was but a metaphor and that the text was but a text, then the power of metaphor and text would collapse. To put it crisply, the paternal metaphor can only reproduce when the father appears unmetaphoric. And, on the receiving end of this rhetoric, the metaphors explaining sonship only finally take hold as expected when they are taken up as markers of a Real form of sonship that is unmetaphorically connected to the father. The

mediacy of paternal language that creates and connects fathers and sons, then, like the mother, only works in finally disappearing as the always present but invisible conduit to the next moment of reproduction.

"TOYS FOR TOTS": DESIRE AND TRUTH IN THE PARABLE OF THE BURNING HOUSE

On first glance, the story that the Buddha launches into after the above valorization of similes and parables appears rather simple. To explain to the audiences, inside and outside of the narrative, the nature of Śāriputra's conversion, the Buddha offers what he explicitly labels an analogy *(biyu)* in order to clarify things.[53] In this parable, he describes how a compassionate father saved his greedy sons from a burning house by promising to give them, if they would immediately leave the house and their current toys, brand-new versions of the specific kinds of toys that they desired. Enticed by this offer, the sons pour out of the house only to discover that only one kind of toy awaits them, a great ox-drawn cart. In the narrative, the commentary on this parable is restricted to the question, Is the father guilty of lying?[54] This question is posed and resolved to the narrative's satisfaction since it is explained that the father was acting with the boys' best interests in mind and the sons' well-being could only be safeguarded by generating this fiction.

If we ask about the structuring of desire and truth in this parable, many things about this story and its place in the overall plot of the *Lotus Sūtra* become much harder to grasp. For the sake of brevity, I'll focus on the main issue of intersubjectivity, which is central to the story and which offers ample material for thinking about the sūtra's agenda of seducing the reader into accepting new master plots and new forms of Buddhist sonship. As a preview to the following argument, I believe that this parable reveals, indirectly, that the author hopes to seduce readers into accepting the *Lotus Sūtra*'s master plot by, ironically, showing them how master plots work, a maneuver that essentially requires that the son learn about the father's view of the son, all in order that he can thereby become the proper son. Thus, contrary to more standard readings of this parable, it seems that the desire to be a son is produced from watching how the father treats sons with a mixture of love and deception, a vision that of course ends up revealing the truth about deception in the form of something like a conspiracy theory—all other Buddhisms out there are but fabricated annunciations whose purposes and plots can, finally, be read only through this master plot. The dif-

53. T.9.12b.12.

54. For another account of the narrative issues involved in introducing a lying Buddha, see Donald S. Lopez Jr., "The Institution of Fiction in Mahāyāna Buddhism," in *Myths and Fictions: Their Place in Philosophy and Religion,* ed. Shlomo Biderman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

ference between the *Lotus Sūtra*'s strategy and a conspiracy theory is that while conspiracy theories (revealed plots, more exactly) also seek to seduce an audience, they do not include the "official" untruthful versions in their own plot, put there specifically to draw audiences into the master plot. Of course, this is just the brilliant design of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s agenda.

The parable opens with the Buddha asking Śāriputra to imagine a very wealthy man, up in years, who owns a large decrepit house, currently full of people and with only one door.[55] Suddenly a fire breaks out, and only the father knows about it. His first gesture is to think of how to save his sons from a fiery death. The narrative introduces the occupants of the house as "a hundred, two hundred, perhaps as many as five hundred," but it is only "ten, twenty, perhaps thirty" that are his sons. Thus the text moves from a more universal group composed of sons and nonsons to focus on the father's concern for his sons, whom he saves and treats in a manner that the text dubiously calls "impartiality." Faced with this dire situation, the father admits that though he has ample force, the narrowness of the exit is going to make it hard for him to bundle them up and carry them out, and so he concludes that he can only save them by invoking in them a certain desire. Though having made this decision, he first announces straightforwardly to the boys that they must leave the house to avoid the fire. This direct appeal to avoid the pain of fire achieves nothing as the boys "raced about this way and that in play, and looked at their father and did not believe him."[56]

The father then decides to use "expedient means that will make it possible for the sons to escape harm." Thus the narrative works up two major problems: the fire and the desires of the boys who cannot be bothered with the fear of fire, which apparently only the father knows of. The solution that the father hits upon is to use the second problem to solve the first problem, that is, to use the boys' desire to quite literally "lure"[57] them out of the house with promises of fulfilling all their desires. Thus a problem, when rightfully held, becomes the solution.

The apparent straightforwardness of this narrative quickly disappears once we note that the reader and Śāriputra, both of whom are currently receiving this story, have been constructed as sons in a very different way

55. The father is usually aged in the father-son stories in the *Lotus Sūtra,* presumably because transmission of identity is to occur at death as it would in a familial situation; see, for example, the case of the Medicine King Bodhisattva story in chapter 23. Fatherhood, then, only prepares to repeat itself when it absolutely needs to, an interesting limitation in the text given that the text itself carries the charge to reproduce versions of itself all the time. As we will see, it would seem that placing transmission at the death moment increases desire for the text in just such a manner so as to encourage its own transmission at any time.

56. Watson, p. 57, revised; T.9.12c.3.

57. The verb in Chinese is *you;* T.9.12c.1; it is used again in the same way slightly later, T.9.13b.14.

from the sons in the story, even though the story is supposedly offered to them to explain their identities. On a very basic level, whereas the sons in the house have a spatial problem—leaving the burning house—Śāriputra and the reader have an identity problem. The boys in the story never question their relationship with the father, and yet that is what the story is supposedly dedicated to clarifying—Śāriputra's reidentification with his father. The following parable of the Prodigal Son will directly portray identity shifts, but here in the first parable of the text, identity shift is unmistakenly mapped on to a simple shift in locale. This mismatch might just be happenstance, or it might reveal that the author wished to give the reader an analogy for shifting sonship in which sonship, in fact, does not shift but just changes locale. Or better, encoded in the first analogy for shifting sonship, we have yet another analogy: a change in place is standing in for the much more difficult notion of changing sonship.

A deeper problem appears when we note that the parable is positioned so that as reading-sons learn that their Buddha-father cares for his sons and so on, they also gain a vision of the father looking at his sons, and thus they are from the outset learning precisely what the sons in the story never come to comprehend. Sons in the story are never shown reflecting on how their father sees them, or what the father knows about fire, and, most important, the kinds of subterfuges that the father might work up in the shadows produced by the greedy sons' ignorance. Clearly, the blindness of the boys in the parable is the opposite of the gradual "enlightenment" of the sons outside of the parable who come to understand father-son matters from the father's point of view, even though they have been invited to see facsimiles of themselves in these greedy boys who never engage in just these intersubjective reflections.

Given this narrative framing and mismatch between sons in and outside of the parable, as Śāriputra and the reader "listen" to the father explain his problematic relationship with his wayward sons, they are put in an awkward relationship with the Buddha-father telling the story. First, the sons in the story are cared for simply because they are sons, as their selection from among the "hundred, two hundred, perhaps as many as five hundred" other occupants makes clear. Moreover, their actions are described as greedy and self-centered, but it is just this greed that saves them, once the father knows how to manipulate it. Thus, though the sons in the story are rescued for no reason other than being sons, the sons who read about these sons and are converted to the *Lotus Sūtra* are actually saved by watching the whole drama, that is, by gaining an overview of the father's relationship to the sons.

In effect, Śāriputra as son and reader as son are only saved when they, as subjects, watch facsimiles of themselves as pure objects receive love and aid from a father who cares for them simply because they are *his objects*. Clearly, these sons are not saved by learning about their correct relationship to their

father or their deepest and truest subjectivity, as Śāriputra and the reader expect to be. Even more problematic, the very fact of receiving the parable in order to understand one's sonship means that Śāriputra and the reader are learning to become sons by learning the truth about fathers and sons, a fact that puts them completely at odds with the sons in the parable who never focus on anything other than toys and are saved, in fact, through the maintenance of their ignorance. Thus, again, we see that the metaphor of sonship, here clearly announced as such by defining this account as a parable-for-newly-recognized-sonship, still rides on the back of a kind of nonmetaphoric sonship that, within the parable, remains unexplained and apparently nonlinguisitic. The full discrepancy in mapping the parable back on to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s program is that within the parable, it is a *particular* kind of sonship that, though unexplained, allows the father to focus on just those thirty-some boys, neglecting all the others in the burning house. Thus, within the parable, sonship is a kind of private, substantial, nonlinguistic something that can determine who lives and dies.

Given these fundamental discrepancies in mapping the parable on to its audiences, I suspect that the author wanted the reader to both identify with these sons and rise above them. Thus, in receiving these stories, the reading sons get smart about dumb sons, even though they are supposedly reading about themselves. Clearly, Śāriputra and the reader can no longer really occupy just the position of "dumb son" that they have been offered, because they see it from beyond its contours, and it was just these limited contours that defined the identity of those distracted sons.[58] Moreover, in consuming the parable, just as the identity shift is mismatched with the shift in locale, the angst of shifting identities is displayed as a kind straightforward progression in which sons chase after what they want and get something totally satisfying. I would suggest that this mismatching actually further induces desire for the whole program of converting to the *Lotus Sūtra* since it is sanctioning desire and offering the reader a facsimile of his situation that implies the certainty of a successful rescue.

This problem of Śāriputra and the reader "getting smart about dumb sons" can be expanded to show other interesting dynamics with regard to levels of seduction that the story seems to be simultaneously explaining and effecting. The sons in the story are saved through a combination of their

58. Structurally, this is just the inverse of the Mahāyāna relationship to pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism. Above, I argued that Śāriputra could only cross into the Mahāyāna by redrawing the Venn diagram of the split between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism so that Mahāyāna opened up to include Hīnayāna as a purposeful precursor to itself, whereas here the metaphor of sonship is offered as an example for achieving this redrawing works in reverse: Śāriputra sees himself as in the group of dumb sons and also outside them, looking at them from the father's point of view, a transcendent viewpoint that annuls the essentially closed and blind identity of the sons.

desires and their blindness, which allows them to believe their father's ruse long enough to come running out of the house. Śāriputra and all readers are given a vision precisely of the sons' blindness and therefore, at least on one level, lose the nose ring that would have received the hook that the father would have used to save them—readers now know of the father's ruses for dealing with their blindness, and thus have a knowledge that will prevent them from being lured out of the house by the father. Given these differences, it is probably fair to conclude that the reader-Śāriputra isn't being worked on like the sons in the story, since to explain expedient means to the son is to ruin the power of expedient means, unless you can bump it up to another level in which the explanation of expedient means is itself an expedient means, a likely possibility foreshadowed already above and which will soon be acknowledged more or less directly by Śāriputra.

To get at this possibility of the "higher" expedient means of revealing expedient means, a technique that is left unrevealed and therefore effective in the narrative, we need to focus on the way the story places the reader as an observer who learns about the need for fathers to rely on expedient means and in that very education comes to accept his own sonship vis-à-vis the Buddha-father who is currently employing expedient means in his education of his new son in the narrative, Śāriputra. Thus in fact the parable functions on two levels. First, it is a "direct" example of expedient means because it shows a father offering circuitous "truth" to his preoccupied sons. And second, on another level, it is also an expedient means within the Buddha's "actual" relationship to Śāriputra (and the reader), since the Buddha is using this story to confirm the act of converting Śāriputra.

Thus, in the narrative, the parable is something that explains the cause of Śāriputra's conversion even as it appears, too, as the effect of that conversion since the Buddha launched into the story right on the heels of Śāriputra's conversion. Consequently, and this too is regularly misinterpreted in modern accounts, the act of performing expedience means, as defined by the text, actually includes telling stories of expedient means. Or, perhaps more exactly, the author has created a Buddha who explains why the Buddha needs to be an author in the fullest sense of the word: one who is successful at seducing readers into narrative portrayals of the Real that are acknowledged as narrative portrayals. The catch is that the narrative has defined buddhahood such that it fundamentally equals being an author and thus revealing the Buddha's authorial project (his reliance on parables and stories) simply confirms his status as a buddha. This technique of creating a textual buddha who gives a new definition of buddhahood and then turns to immediately fulfill that definition is clearly visible at the introduction to this parable when the Buddha says to Śāriputra:[59]

59. Watson, p. 56, with changes; T.9.12b.9.

> At that time the Buddha said to Śāriputra, "Did I not tell you earlier that when the buddhas, the World Honored Ones, use a variety of stories *(yinyuan),* analogies *(biyu),* verbal expressions *(yanci),* and expedient means to preach the Law, it is all for the sake of converting bodhisattvas. Moreover, Śāriputra, I too will now make use of analogies *(biyu)* to again clarify this meaning" . . . [and then follows the Parable of the Burning House].

Of course, once we catch sight of this narrative technique for verifying the narrative, we ought to ask if the *Lotus Sūtra* version of the Buddha isn't largely based on taking care of the problem of relocating the Buddha in textuality. That is to say, the *Lotus Sūtra* version of the Buddha is, at least in this presentation, an author of unfailing talent because that is exactly what the author of such a buddha needs. Or better, to really inscribe the father-tradition in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the author had to create the Buddha in his own image with the consequence that the Buddha, in effect, appears as a wily author, as the above quote suggests. At any rate, the Buddha and the author are basically doing the same thing—purveying entrancing stories about the value of paradigm shifts.

To return to the question of how revealing the father's tactic of expedient means works to seduce the reader, we ought to first locate the reader as lodged somewhere between the identity of the father and his sons, as they are constituted in the parable. The reading son's view is determined by seeing the greedy and self-absorbed sons through the eyes of the father and learning how these sons are manipulated by their concerned father's subterfuge. Thus the reader's gaze, from the beginning of the parable, is quite a bit closer to the seeing father than to the blind and greedy sons. Though it might seem strange to fuse the reader with this father figure in the parable, in fact I suggest that it is just in gaining the father's view that the parable becomes so seductive and leads the reader into accepting the entire package as legitimate.

In a moment we will see evidence of awareness of this circle of the higher expedient of revealing expedient means registered in the narrative, but for now let me note that we get a significant hint about how these layers of desire and identification work when we learn that the father can only save his sons when he produces desire in them, for it is only a transformation of desire in the son that can be counted on to save the day. Thus the narrative has constructed a rather direct facsimile of its own task: the desire of sons in and outside of the story must be transformed for their own good. And thus we are at that critical level where the narrative is displaying the work it has to do *in order* to do its work. Of course, we have seen this duplicating pattern already as very clearly demonstrated in the presentation of Śāriputra's conversion. What is so interesting is that as the text moves between these levels of sons—the reader, Śāriputra, and the greedy boys—the supposed same-

ness between the levels actually also encodes all sorts of differences that make observers, ironically, all the more eager to find sameness and to identify with images of themselves that are decidedly different from them.

Thus the sons in the story remain ignorant of the process. Their desires must blindly move from the toys *in the house* to the promised carts *outside of the house,* with just that shift in desire being paramount to their well-being and never involving the kind of deep anxiety that Śāriputra expressed in facing the paradigm shift that the Buddha was asking of him. Thus if the reader is identifying with Śāriputra, the author seems to be offering the reader an objectified and radically simplified version of the process that the reader himself is in the process of undergoing, since the reader, like Śāriputra, must renounce one set of desires and move onto another set in order to maintain his well-being and Buddhist authenticity. The difference is, and this is precisely the point of desire, the reader receiving this parable is encouraged to make the shift knowing that the father is one who reclaims his sons regardless of their desires, and more, even because their desires.

Put this way we are not too far from the complexities of Maitreya that also seemed designed to offer the reader confidence by showing how a dubious Buddhist came to see the light (see chap. 2). And perhaps there is yet another layer of desire here. Śāriputra and the reader will make their shift to recognize their new father without being as greedy and recalcitrant as the boys within the parable who wanted only toys and not fathers. Thus there seems to be a kind of pride in coming to learn what fathers do for their sons, along with the desire to be desired by just such a comprehensive father. That is, in accepting this parable of fathers and sons, Śāriputra and the reader have not only renarrated themselves, they have renarrated their truth-father as one who not only perverts truth to save them but also loves them and cares for them despite their pettiness.

Though the narrative might seem to be playing with fire by inducing a deceitful father figure, in fact the opposite seems to have occurred since in revealing prior deceptions, the truth finally seems available. Thus, despite depicting the father as deceitful, the reader's desire for this narrative *about* the role of deceit has to be taken as true and undistorted by expedient means even as the truth-father is showing how he uses deceptive and distorting measures to construct other Buddhist narratives, narratives that other Buddhists had previously assumed to be truthful and ultimate plotlines. In short, the narrative offers itself to the reader as the final Real by explaining how the Real had to be distorted in order to adapt to other teaching occasions. Moreover, the Buddha's reliance on deception is justified by the sons' limitations, not the father's lack of regard for truth in discourse. What is crucial here is that tradition under the label "Hīnayāna" bears the burden of being deceptive, which it most certainly is from the *Lotus Sūtra*'s point of view. Thus as "truth" is finally revealed here it ends up

casting old truth as deceptive and never allows that deception itself might be the cornerstone of this rhetoric of deception. That is, the overall conspiracy at work here is to cast traditional Buddhism as a conspiracy.

Thus, as the Buddha admits that there were multiple Buddhist plots out there, he clarifies that in fact there was only one true one—the *Lotus Sūtra*—which, however, turns out to be no more than the plot about the other plots. In sum, the plot of the *Lotus Sūtra* has just claimed for itself the paternal master signifier position that can unman other paternal master signifiers as it wishes. The trick is to seduce readers into this program by getting them to understand their prereading involvement in this master plot—their inherent Buddha sonship that came even before their Buddhist identity—and to understand the tension and movement between plots as part of the real and final plot. When put this way, like the above question of the Buddha-as-author, it is worth considering that the appearance of the innate Buddha-nature within Mahāyāna rhetoric might have a lot to do with polemical overcomings, which as we have seen are about finding deeper strata of fathers and sons and not simply "philosophical" speculations on the nature of the subject's ontology.

Near the end of the tale, the author hints that revealing to the reader the father's use of expedient means on his sons may in fact itself be an expedient means. The Buddha has asked Śāriputra if the father in the parable was a liar: Śāriputra answers, "No," adding, "Why do I say this? Because if they [the sons] were able to preserve their lives, then they had already obtained a *plaything of sorts (wanhao zhi ju)*. . . . Even if the rich man had not given them the tiniest carriage, he would still not be guilty of falsehood."[60] Śāriputra's answer suggests a tripling of toys, or worse, a toy-metaphor for the very efficacy of the long metaphor about the toys of salvation.

To clarify this surprising comment, let me clarify the various types of toys in the story. There are the "real" toys in the house, then there are toys outside of the house that are both real toys and "religious toys" in the sense of representing religious programs, when read from outside the frame of the parable. And, finally, there is that "plaything of sorts" that Śāriputra identifies as just that compensation for the movement of the sons' desire from house-toys to toys beyond the house, even if there were no actual toys outside the house. Śāriputra here speaks what the text wants read as truth and asserts that as the sons' desires are redirected, the locale of their actions is changed, and just this change in toy-setting is the toy that would redeem the father's strategy and make his whole discourse on toys valid and upright, even if in the end there are no religious toys, since clearly the final religious toy is to move sons from one locale to another. This comment, set as it is in

60. Watson, p. 58; T.9.13a.5.

judgment over the use of deception in the parable, seems designed to return the reader's gaze to the larger frame of text, from whence he and the internal audience were "watching" the sons in the parable. Thus as Śāriputra absolves the father in the parable he naturally is absolving the speaking Buddha who told him this parable.

This short line about this third kind of toy is, I think, the key to the solution of the reader-son's positionality vis-à-vis the father and sons in the story within the story. First let us remember that there are three sets of sons that are progressively more comprehensive in both senses of the word: the greedy sons, Śāriputra, and the reader who sometimes receives narratives "with" Śāriputra and yet also sometimes watches him in the narrative. Thus the reader-son watched Śāriputra come to the realization of his Mahāyāna sonship and in that watching is seduced into reappraising his own sonship. A similar thing will happen to Śāriputra as he watches these stupid sons, for by the end of the story, he is given enough authority to pronounce the father innocent of trickery because he presumably now knows all levels of the game.

Hence the initial conclusion would be that the author plans to purvey sonship by displaying several levels of sonship in action; that is, sons convert from watching sons convert. The second conclusion is that portraying sons to sons inevitably brings the observing sons up to the level of the father, since the narrative of sons is told from the father's point of view. Thus sonship in the observing son is actually produced from coming to know the father's narrative, which is not accessible to the sons in the parable. Thus, the portrayal of level 1 sons (the greedy, nameless sons in the house) to level 2 sons (Śāriputra and reader) requires looking through the father's eyes. This complicated figure of vision produces a higher level of desire: not a desire for toys on the first level, or even for the magnificent second-order toys, but a desire to be a son who doesn't need toys, even as he needs to have the "plaything of sorts," as Śāriputra called it, of watching lower sons leave their initial toys and come to desire the higher forms of toys. Put schematically, Son2 is really only Son2 when he proves that he understands and accepts the way the father treats Son1, traditional Buddhists, that is, who never correctly knew themselves or the father. Hence, Son2 is the one who reflects back on what the father did to Son1 and approves. Son1, like Hīnayāna Buddhism, has to be a whipping boy, a detour, a blind nugget that is circumscribed, used, and enjoyed, even as he does not know himself or his role. Son2 is who he is precisely by agreeing with the father about Son1 and Son1's blind relationship to the father, which, again, rests on a kind of unarticulated primal sonship that the text never wants to address.

Framed in this manner, I think we are close to articulating a major structure of the *Lotus Sūtra* when we read this story to show that it is just this collusion between Son2 and the father in regard to Son1 (Hīnayāna Buddhism)

that is the hallmark of conversion to the *Lotus Sūtra:* Śāriputra and presumably the reader now know that the Buddha-father tricked Son1, and in understanding that trick become Son2 with the promise of thereby establishing a correct and final relationship with their father. Thus graduating sons from level 1 to 2 required a massive paradigm shift, and the erasure of one paternal logic by another. And for that to occur the sons had to be shown the view of things from their "new" father's point of view, which is precisely where paradigms are defined and divulged. In the end, there is no better way to upend and reconstruct a prior paternal symbolic system than to show its inhabitants that it was built simply as a step toward the final form. In short, the *Lotus Sūtra* presents itself as something like uncovering a conspiracy theory: it alone knows the real plotline behind the apparent plots that the duped public had thought were final. The pleasure of this revelation is made even sweeter in the *Lotus Sūtra* by making this a caring conspiracy: the truth of the final plot had to be withheld until now, or it would have damaged the family of "citizens."

In terms of desire, I probably ought to add that the reader watches a father take care of bad sons and thinks, given the kindness of the father who worries so over his sons, it would be so much more righteous to love the father, and to obey his commands. This of course is exactly what is missing in the portrayal of the greedy sons; they cannot be convinced directly to obey their father or to appreciate his kindness. The reader's desire, then, is to be desired by the father and, too, to fulfill his dictates, but the structure of the narrative allows the reader-son to superimpose his more comprehensive and intersubjectively accurate sonship over the blind and forever unexplained sonship presented in the narrative. In this gesture, he loves the father for the unconditional love that the father tenders even to the basest of sons, and now he can show his understanding of the father's primary gesture in just such a way to win more love. Thus sons *in* the parable are brought home to the father through a combination of his love and their blindness, while sons *receiving* the parable (Śāriputra and the reader) are brought home by coming to know and love their father's love of *them* and simultaneously "seeing" how he sees the sons' blindness.

THE VERSES

The complexities of this parable continue to grow in the verses that follow in which the Buddha promises to restate what he has just told Śāriputra. The verses, in fact, are quite different from the prose section, and though it would take another full chapter to explore all these differences, I would like to point out three basic themes that add to the arguments I have been developing: (1) a warning that those who resist or slander this discourse will lose their seeds of buddhahood and be punished in various hells for inter-

minable lengths of time; (2) rules for transmitting this text, rules that when discussed actually seem more intent on producing desire in the reader than in establishing official codes of transmission of the text; and (3) an explanation of the role of faith in effecting transmission.

As for the first theme, the verses begin just as the prose section did, with the fire breaking out in the old house. However, in describing the dilapidated state of the house, the verses veer off into rather hysterical details about all the evil animals and demons that live there. This motif is missing in the prose section, and its presence here seems to play two roles. First, it simply makes the house a more frightening place, which makes the reader want the sons to leave even more quickly and thus, by following the circle of identification of the reader with these sons, makes the reader qua son-learning-about-the-*Lotus Sūtra* want to leave the house by accepting the *Lotus Sūtra.* Second, and this is just another arc on the circle of the first point, the hell that is depicted *in* the house seems to rhyme with the hell that is promised for those who would resist the *Lotus Sūtra,* or would slander it. Hence much of the second part of the verses is taken up with explaining the hells that one will fall into for rejecting the *Lotus Sūtra.*

Thus I suspect that this casting of hell-beings in the house works as a bookend for the later one, since the two link up insofar as rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* means hell on both accounts. In the parable, rejecting the father's discourse means hell-in-the-house, and then, within the larger frame of listening to the parable of the sons' resistance to the father's discourse, hell is also promised for the reluctant listener, be he in the discourse, like Śāriputra, or totally outside of it, as the reader looking in. Seeing the pair of hells work this way makes good sense with the later passage in which the Buddha makes the analogy between the greedy sons' burning house and the samsara that holds Śāriputra and "the others."[61]

In these rules about the effect of accepting or rejecting the discourse, the anger and anxiety of the text become clear. The author invokes a wickedly slanted system of justice in which even doubting this discourse will land one in hell for eons. This, it would seem, is the inverse of the power of one's most glancing reception of one stanza from the text that would confirm true sonship and eventual buddhahood. Even more threatening are the two verses that claim that if you reject this discourse, your "seeds of Buddhahood will be cut off." What might this mean? Clearly, we have a seed-field metaphor in place, as the reader learns that within his continuum there is something akin to a seed that should grow into a buddha. Presumably, these seeds stand for just that mark of having been injected with something that is the same as the father and which will turn one into the father. Though

61. Watson, p. 71; T.9.15a.16 ff.

seed metaphors for paternity are fairly common in India, we ought not to miss that this metaphor in fact doubles the subject as he is both the seed and the field, for what would be the point of having a seed planted where there was no field? By implication, then, the subject is a complex site where three people come into contact: the subject is the place where the *father* did his work and thus he is the womb and the *mother,* but he is also, as *son,* the place where this work will come to full fruition as the seed-in-the-field becomes the thing that produced the seed, the father-plant, that is.

Given that this text is so intent on overwriting an earlier version of Buddhist sonship with a larger, more transcendent version of sonship, it is surprising that sonship in general is being demonstrated as potentially revocable. Clearly, though the text threatens, here at least, that one's piece of the father, that internal seed that first makes sons and then turns them into fathers, is not permanently installed. The seed could be lost, and it is lost through a bad relationship to the discourse of fathers and sons. At first this seems odd given that the whole point of the father-son motif in the *Lotus Sūtra* is to give the reader the sense that everything has already happened and can only develop in one direction. Presumably, though, this is just the point where the comfort of an "always-already included" motif is recast to make it more contingent. This is that place where the son who disregards the law of the father, just as the sons do in the Burning House parable, could lose all.

Hence we see again that there is a crucial gap between sons in the parable and sons outside of the parable. In the parable, there are no risks: follow your greedy desires and you will win all because the father knows what you want and lines that up with the Good and the True, which he alone knows. However, sons watching this kind of blind, greedy son are altogether different and stand to lose their sonship if they do not accept this text. Thus, outside the parable, sons have to assent to a discourse on the father's manipulation of the son in order to keep their sonship. In all this, the threat of losing sonship seems to be offered sincerely and the verses surrounding it go on to specify that one who rejects the *Lotus Sūtra* will never see a buddha again:[62]

> A sinful person of this sort will constantly be born amid difficulties, crazed, deaf, confused in mind, and never will hear the Law. For countless kalpas numerous as the Ganges sands he will at birth become deaf and dumb, his faculties impaired, will constantly dwell in hell, strolling in it as though it were a garden. . . . I tell you, Śāriputra, if I were to describe the punishments that fall on persons who slander this Sūtra, I could exhaust a kalpa and never come to the end.

62. Watson, pp. 76–77; T.9.15c.25.

As is probably obvious, not only does this kind of stubborn listener-reader get to imagine the boundless pains of hell (which are abundantly recounted in this section), he is offered a future that is bereft of contact with this discourse and, moreover, bereft of intersubjectivity. This kind of person, in denying a discourse explaining how he ought to see himself through "his" father's eyes, is promised a similitude of blindness and closedness: he will be physically unable to process discourse through congenital deafness and speechlessness; furthermore, he will be so crazed with mental afflictions that cogent recognition of truth and his identity in that truth will also be impossible. Thus, we ought to conclude, that the cutting off of the internal Buddha seed is finalized in producing a being physically cut off from discourse, not just from Buddha discourse, and Mahāyāna discourse, but from all discourse.[63]

The second point about how the verses elicit the reader's desires by reframing Śāriputra's desires is a more complex argument and opens up a number of tightly intertwined issues that result from a discourse in which the discourse itself is the topic, and in which desire, too, is the topic, discussed in just such a way to create more desire. The complexity at first is not noticeable as the verses simply explain to Śāriputra how he is to transmit this very text to others. First, though, the Buddha offers Śāriputra a deal: belief in this parable for security in his inclusion in the new group, those converted bodhisattvas on the Buddha Way:[64]

> I say to you Śāriputra for the sake of living beings I employ these analogies *(biyu)* to preach the single Buddha Vehicle. If you and the others are capable of believing and accepting my words, then all of you are certain to attain the Buddha Way. This vehicle is subtle, wonderful, foremost in purity; throughout all worlds it stands unsurpassed. The Buddha delights in and approves it, and all livings beings should praise it, offer it alms and obeisance. . . . I tell you, Śāriputra, you and the others are all my children, and I am a father to you. For repeated kalpas you have burned in the flames of manifold sufferings but I will save you all and cause you to escape from the threefold world.

In this section the author is shifting frames from the parable to the rules about accepting the parable, and then even farther out to the rules for accepting the sūtra that houses the parables. Recognizing how the text pro-

63. For those readers interested in more symbolic readings, I should point out that it is probably not accidental that all these demons in the burning house are described as doing bad things with their mouths: they yell, they eat one another, they bare their teeth and snarl. In short, these creatures represent bad orality as the opposite of the Buddha's gentle, meaningful, and salvific utterances, whose very style was the key to Śāriputra's conversion in the middle of this section when he was wondering if what looked like a buddha was actually a demon. The other crucial thing about these demons is their hunger, another kind of dangerous orality, again the opposite of the Buddha's total containment.

64. Watson, pp. 70–71, with a slight change; T.9.15a.5.

duces just this ripple effect is particularly reasonable, because at the end of these verses, the next chapter is defined explicitly as the rippling outward of Śāriputra's conversion, when a larger group of monks follow his example.

The rippling in this final part of the chapter works as follows. First, the discourse shifts from narrating the burning house story to having the Buddha explain to Śāriputra a causality that surrounds the reception of this parable. If Śāriputra and the unnamed "others" accept this discourse then they are saved, they are in the new group, those on the Buddha Way. Hence, as mentioned above, we have more than a double, since the parable itself explicitly explained that it was a parable about accepting Buddhist teachings. Thus the degree to which Śāriputra accepts the parable now is just the degree to which he is accepting an overview of the mode by which everyone else accepts Buddhist teachings.

The full density of this situation comes clear when we add in the reader who is watching Śāriputra watch the Buddha give him a discourse about how the Buddha watches others receive Buddhist discourse. The richness of this structure is that the reader is invited to find himself on several levels in the narrative. His locale and its associated reaction to the narrative is not simply connected to Śāriputra's; rather it is connected to the whole theory of receiving Buddhist teachings in which he, as a potential son of the Buddha, finds himself first lodged in the burning house, being invited to exit to play with different toys of desire, and then again through the eyes of Śāriputra (the first converted son of the Buddha in the text) who watches the Buddha using toy-discourse to save his sons, and then again as a reading-son being spoken to quite sternly about the proper reception of these stories of reception.

Thus we have to say that the *Lotus Sūtra*'s strategy of seduction is to double seduction such that seduction is effected by displaying how strategies of seduction ought to work. The reason this actually works well is that the explanation of the process of seduction (the telling of parables) reveals the father's love for his sons, and this love is also invoked as the cause of explaining the son's seduction in the parable. On both levels what has not changed is the principle of the father's love for his sons. Thus, in the frame around the parable, Śāriputra and the reader "fall" for this narrative about the father's love of his sons because this love is also explained as the cause of showing these sons what the father does with his sons. Thus the blindness of the sons in the parable, a blindness that includes a blindness of their father's love, is recovered in the wider frame by a vision of that blindness which also recovers a vision of the father's love and joins with it in accepting that this mode of seduction is just an effect of the father's love waiting for the sons to see it for what it is. It is producing a vision of just this "higher" son's comprehension of the father's love, and the way that it overcomes the denseness of the greedy and uninformed sons, that serves as the higher expedient means in the story.

And yet there is one last thing to mention. As Śāriputra and the reader come to grant truth to this narrative they have in fact made a kind of deal with the text. Essentially they are saying, "We traditional Buddhists will let the narrative destroy our hallowed traditions provided that this father is shown to be loving and forever interested in our welfare." The violence visited on the prior symbolic system of traditional Buddhism is then offset by the kindness of this new form of the Buddha who shows his care in so many ways and even manages to explain that his destruction of the prior form wasn't really a destruction since what appeared as a truth-system wasn't really ever anymore than a temporary ploy constructed from untruth.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

In the expanding cycle of conversions, chapter 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra* presents four famous pre-Mahāyāna monks watching Śāriputra's conversion and responding in kind. Their reaction doesn't simply repeat Śāriputra's, though, since they are located on the level of observers. In fact, they are located closer to the reader, who, with them, just witnessed Śāriputra's conversion; thus they are spectators to the drama of the *Lotus Sūtra* in a way that Śāriputra never was. However, unlike the reader, they exist on that middle plane of the contemporary where they observe the conversion of others and then receive personal teaching and prophesies from the Buddha, an honor that, of course, the reader never is given.

In watching the Buddha give Śāriputra his prediction of buddhahood, they, as a choruslike group, respond jointly:[65]

> We stand at the head of the monks and are all of us old and decrepit. We believed that we had already attained nirvana and that we were incapable of doing more, and so we never sought to attain unsurpassed enlightenment. It has been a long time since the World Honored One first began to expound the Law. *During that time we have sat in our seats, our bodies weary and inert, meditating solely on the concepts of emptiness, non-form, and non-action.* But as to the pleasures and transcendental powers of the Law of bodhisattvas, or the purifying of buddha lands and the salvation of living beings—these our minds took no joy in. Why is this? Because the World Honored One had made it possible for us to transcend the three-fold world and to attain the enlightenment of nirvana.

This initial framing of their reaction is rather in line with what Śāriputra had said at the beginning of his conversion sequence. These monks, located "at the head of the monks," thought they had achieved everything possible in Buddhism and were the top dogs of the system. They thought that their

65. Watson, pp. 80–81 (emphasis added); T.9.16b.13.

nirvana was in fact closure, and they contented themselves with tiresome meditation on emptiness and so on. Then, suddenly, they "heard from the Buddha a law that they had never known before."[66] Hence in this short passage they are preparing themselves to be reinducted into the heart of Buddhism by acknowledging that their prior form of Buddhism was incomplete and small. Now, as witnesses to Śāriputra's conversion, the four-monk chorus derides their former pre-Mahāyāna position in order to accept and validate the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim that there is a whole other realm of activity and development that leads to unsurpassable enlightenment, a realm only imaginable within the sphere of Mahāyāna teachings. The emphasis on their age, their exhaustion, and their decrepitude seems to be in place to announce a kind of heaviness and decadence associated with attachment to that preliminary stage of closure. Conversely, though the bodhisattva path is going to mean much more work, they are shown responding with joy and exuberance, markers of life and levity.

Furthermore, they are shown explaining a failure to respond to prior calls to join the Mahāyāna. They say, "When we heard of this unsurpassed enlightenment, which the Buddha uses to teach and convert the bodhisattvas, our minds were not filled with any thought of joy or approval. But now in the presence of the Buddha we have heard this śrāvaka [Śāriputra] receive a prophecy that he will attain unsurpassed enlightenment and our minds are greatly delighted. We have gained what we never had before."[67] Thus they seem to represent themselves as casual witnesses to earlier Mahāyāna dispensations but until now did not know that these teachings were to be applied to themselves. However, seeing one of their own, a śrāvaka such as Śāriputra, receive these teachings and the prediction to become a buddha has changed all that.

To explain this shift in perspective that was generated in witnessing Śāriputra's conversion, the four monks offer a parable to explain their newfound understanding. This represents an interesting shift in the structure of the text: until now the Buddha had been doing the teaching, but now a significant narrative—including the explicit use of expedient means, that is, parables as cause and effect of truth—will be told from the point of view of the converts. Equally reversed, the story they tell is a father-son episode in which a father tricks his wayward son into returning home to receive his fabulous wealth and aristocratic heritage. Thus, whereas the Parable of the Burning House was about avoiding pain by exiting from dangerous domesticity, the story of the Prodigal Son is about recapturing the son and bringing him back into his proper home of luxury and pleasure.

The story opens by depicting a chasm of difference between the penni-

66. Watson, p. 80; T.9.16b.9.
67. Watson, p. 81; T.9.16b.9.

less vagabond son and his boundlessly rich father. Though the father has everything, jewels, servants, and so on, he misses his son terribly. Worse, he is aging and realizes that if he does not find his son he will have no one to whom he can pass on his wealth:[68]

> The father thought constantly of his son, but though he had been parted from him for over fifty years, he had never told anyone else about the matter. He merely pondered to himself, his heart filled with regret and longing. He thought to himself that he was old and decrepit. He had great wealth and possessions, gold, silver, and rare treasures that filled and overflowed from his storehouses, but he had no son, so that if he should die, the wealth and possessions would be scattered and lost, for there was no one to entrust them to. . . . And he also had this thought: If I could find my son and entrust my wealth and possessions to him, then I could feel contented and easy in mind and would have no more worries.

This part of the story opens up a number of permutations in father-son rhetoric. The familial part of the story develops from the father's point of view, a father who is struck with a loss. He misses his son but, more important, cannot imagine his accumulated patrimony dispersing randomly at death. So he must find this unique person, his son, in order to properly divest himself of his things before his death. Thus the father is shown operating within a very exacting version of patriarchy whereby adopting a son or passing his wealth to his nephew or another relative is not considered; it has to be his son. The stricture of this demanding form of patriarchy is tightened when we are told that he has only this one son and no other family members.

In short, the text positions the father, like the father in the Burning House parable, looking at a threatening doorway that requires the reconversion of his son(s). However, whereas in the burning house the narrow doorway meant the sons might not get out, here the doorway represents the anxiety that the son might not get in. This only son, the sole conduit for the patriarchy, is the only place where the history and accumulated material of the father can find legitimate movement forward in time. Clearly the story uses the specific desire of this father to transmit his patrimony to his son as a kind of frame for a similar kind of transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s truth to the devoted reader.

For this parallel to hold, the text cannot allow this father to consider dispersing his patrimony at large, for that would effectively cancel his identity as father and obliterate the structuring legality of patriarchy that is invoked

68. Watson, p. 82; T.9.16c.5. The first line in this quote, as found in the *Taishō* version, actually reads "father and mother thought of the son . . . ," though the rest of the story refers only to the father's concerns and actions.

here to serve as a template for the gifts of Buddhist patriarchy that are to be granted to those who deserve it—the sons. If such a communistic leak were allowed, the text would lose its template for securing the reader's desire to be reidentified as a son of the Buddha. Thus it seems that the doorway or exit that is being imposed on the father in the parable is just the same doorway that is being imposed on the "buddha-son" reading the parable: in both cases it is a question of getting the son across that threshold and locating him by the heart/h of patriarchy. So we ought to ask again, Why the narrowness of this door and this fixation on the assumed singularity of the father and one son who, together, form something like a tunnel of love that the *Lotus Sūtra* wants to work up for itself? The answer, it would seem, is that the narrowness of this one-son-conduit is to function as the place of closure where the reader feels that conversion is an inescapable fate, and anyway, is quite attractive given the rather flattering conditions under which it is rendered. In short, just as with the Burning House parable, we reading-sons are learning about the warm and inescapable love of the father.

The pathos of the story develops as the father, continually thwarted by the son's inability to accept the father as father, keeps failing to bring the son home. The father thus finds it necessary to resort to all sorts of trickery in order to finally draw the son into the interior of the patriarchy. In short, the story is about the lengths to which a father will go to make his son recognize his place in the patriline. The first contact between father and son is scripted to heighten just this impossible distance between them, a distance of wealth, purity, social class, and so on, all of which will be overcome once the father makes the son know of their prior sameness:[69]

> World Honored One, at that time the impoverished son drifted from one kind of employment to another until he came by chance to his father's house. He stood by the side of the gate, gazing far off at his father, who was seated on a lion throne, his legs supported by a jeweled footrest, while Brahmans and noblemen, and householders, uniformly deferential, surrounded him. Festoons of pearls worth thousands or tens of thousands adorned his body, and clerks, grooms, and menservants holding white fly whisks stood in attendance to the left and right. . . . Such were the many different types of adornments, the emblems of prerogative and marks of distinction.

The son's response to this view of staggering wealth and decadence is total terror. He regrets having come and prepares to flee. After all, he came to this place, as the narrative notes, completely by accident and was seeking something else altogether. Thus his initial return home was a chance occasion marked by ignorance and misrecognition (presumably an image of the reader's initial happenstance engagement with the text), but it marks the

69. Watson, p. 82; T.9.16c.11.

beginning of a causal sequence that will deliver him, via the father's use of expedient means, into knowledge, self-recognition, and rightful possession of that home. This sequence begins at the gate to the father's residence as the father sees him from a distance and immediately recognizes him as his son. While all this is happening, the son is involved in his own calculations: "Secretly he thought to himself: This must be some king, or one who is equal to a king. This is not the sort of place where I can hire out my labor and gain a living. It would be better to go to some poor village where, if I work hard, I will find a place and easily earn food and clothing. If I stay here for long, I may be seized and pressed into service! Having thought in this way, he raced from the spot."[70]

This internal dialogue opens up an enticing motif in the parable. The son is obsessed with finding a suitable economy, a poor village as he says, where he can trade his labor for food and clothing. The son then is repulsed by the magnitude of the father's wealth, and he is afraid that the sheer size of the father's wealth will destroy any hope of establishing a simple quid pro quo exchange of labor for sustenance. The economic reasoning that fills out the son's character is interesting for several reasons. First, he is shown to be diligent, good-hearted, and fixated on the piecemeal logic of a day laborer—handsome qualities, in a way, which will nonetheless have to be overcome if he is to be vaulted onto the plane defined by a completely transcendent economy far beyond any kind of logical exchange. Second, the father, for his part, wants to give him a gift, and this is the heart of the mismatch in their perspectives. The son cannot imagine or accept that the father's property is to be his by the simple reason of their prior relationship in which the father "made" the son. Throughout the rest of the story, the author plays the commonsensical economy of the son against the fantastic and unthinkable economy of the father, an economy that destroys the son's economy, even as it establishes the economy of patriarchy. Effecting this shift in economies, so carefully prepared for by the father, arguably is set up as a template for the equation that the text is offering to reader—leave off small-minded, work ethic, "Hīnayāna" Buddhism, and accept as fact that your own buddhahood is unavoidable and that your "real" transcendent sonship is actualized only here within the rhetoric of the *Lotus Sūtra.* The metaphoric connection between the two economies in the parable and the hoped-for shift in styles of Buddhism is explicitly made when the four monks say of their earlier practice of Buddhism, "We were diligent and exerted ourselves in this matter until we had attained nirvana, *which is like one day's wages.*"[71]

As the son flees the spectacle of the sumptuous and decadent father, the

70. Watson, pp. 82–83 (emphasis added); T.9.16c.18.
71. Watson, p. 86; T.9.17b.22.

father sends a messenger to capture the son, who, when apprehended, faints, feeling certain that he is being falsely accused of a crime and is about to be executed. This presents another interesting twist: the son is made to misrecognize the law of the father, which he rightly sees as the law that seeks to get hold of him and to pass judgment on him but which he mistakenly identifies as wayward and inexact with regard to his identity and past. The father, who still has not told anyone in the narrative what is going on, decides it is better to let the son go for now and try to seduce him back later. Thus again, as we saw in the Burning House parable, the story fully admits that the father cannot force the son into anything and thus must resort to indirect and seductive measures in order to make the son want to come back to the father.

As the father tells the messenger to dismiss his son, the narrative explains his gesture to the reader in a kind of Shakespearean aside: "Why did he do that? Because the father knew that his son was of humble outlook and ambition, and that his own rich and eminent position would be difficult for the son to accept. He knew very well that this was his son, but as a form of expedient means he refrained from saying to anyone, 'This is my son.'"[72] This stage whisper marks the whole parable as directed at the reader, who also is to be seduced as son but who also always knows more than the son in the story, just as in the Burning House parable. It is just this piece of knowing how the father sees the son that is the meat of the text's seductive ploy, because that is exactly what the reader-son gets that the narrative-son does not get. Or, in other words, the reader-son gets to enjoy the father's view of the narrative-son and just this vision produces desire in the reader-son for a relationship with such a committed and endeavoring father.

In the parable, the father decides to seduce his son by sending two undercover agents after him to offer him double the regular wages that he had been earning. Thus the father shifts his appeal to the son down to the son's meager economy and makes it attractive simply by doubling it, a small mathematical increase that the son can desire and accept. To heighten this sense of connecting with the son's limited and base notion of value, the father has the agents offer the son work clearing away excrement, which presumably was produced by the father's house as this is where the work is to be accomplished.

With his son now on site, the father can see him by looking out the back window of his mansion, and though he has arranged just this kind of labor for his son, he pities him for the filth that he has to handle. The father then decides to make direct contact with his son in the midst of this filth and so, changing his clothes and smearing excrement on his body, approaches the

72. Watson, p. 83; T.9.17a.2.

son disguised in order to seduce him further into his world. Gaining "direct" access to the boy in this clandestine manner that avoids the boy's defenses, the father increases his wages, gives him an old servant, and then formally adopts him, saying:[73]

> "I will be like a father to you, so have no more worries. Why do I say this? Because I am well along in years, but you are still young and sturdy. When you are at work, you are never deceitful or lazy or speak angry or resentful words. You don't seem to have any faults of that kind, the way my other workers do. From now on, you will be like my own son." And the rich man proceeded to select a name and assign it to the man as though he were his child.

This passage is a classic demonstration of the high level of narrative control at work in the *Lotus Sūtra*. First, the father is shown moving downward on the scale of pollution and labor in order to make contact with the son. The father has polluted himself, a fact made clearer by adding the gratuitous detail that he "took in his right hand a utensil for removing excrement,"[74] and all in order to make the son really a son. Structuring the gradual reunion of father and son in this manner presumably makes sonship an even larger gift, since it arrives through the debasement of the father. Second, with the promise of adoption, the father pretends to give the son a facsimile of sonship, supposedly based on the son's merits and work ethic. Because the reader knows that the son is really the father's son, the causality that the father offers his unknowing son for this partial and "fabricated" advancement toward father and son reconciliation is to be read as yet another ploy. Presumably the image of this "fabricated" form of sonship draped over the shoulders of a "real" son makes the reader wish that the son would simply accept his father as his father and skip all this unnecessary work and finagling, an impatience that the author presumably is hoping the reader will act on in his reception of the text and its paternal narrative.

Twenty years pass as the son works in the shit-pit, living outside of the father's house, as the narrative mentions twice, when suddenly the story quickens with the news that the father is going to die soon. Given his imminent demise, the father prepares to bring the son a step closer to him and puts him directly in charge of all his wealth, and, furthermore, he urges the son to see his identity merging with the father: "You are to take complete charge of the amounts I have and of what is to be handed out and gathered in. This is what I have in mind, and I want you to carry out my wishes. Why is this? Because from now on, you and I will not behave as two different persons. So you must keep your wits about you and see that there are not mis-

73. Watson, p. 84; T.9.17a.20.
74. Watson, p. 84; T.9.17a.16.

takes or losses."[75] Here, the son moves up from being an adopted relative with a new name to being a facsimile of the father himself, acting as though they were one and same. Moreover, he now regulates the wealth of the father and is admonished to do so as though they were not "two different persons."

The climax of the son's initiation into the patriline comes just before the father's death when the father invites all the inhabitants of the country to his home and then declares:[76]

> Gentlemen, you should know that this is my son, who was born to me. In such-and-such a city he abandoned me and ran way, and for over fifty years he wandered about suffering hardship. His original name is such-and-such, and my name is such-and-such. . . . This is in truth my son, and I in truth am his father. Now everything that belongs to me, all my wealth and possessions, shall belong entirely to this son of mine.

After the father makes this public statement about their secret relationship, the son responds in kind, "When the impoverished son heard these words of his father, he was filled with great joy, having gained what he never had before, and thought to himself, I originally had no mind to covet or seek such things. Yet now these stores of treasures have come of their own accord!"[77] Thus the story closes with the father successfully inducting his son into the patriline, thereby conserving his wealth within the patriline and convincing all spectators of the truth of their history. In short, the very public nature of this denouement demonstrates the crucial fact that every patriline, private as it is, is also always a claim in the face of the public. The patriline must always be a narrative accepted by those outside of the patriline; otherwise, the private connection between father and son will remain invalid and contestable.[78]

In sum, the story very neatly shows again the devotion of the father in recovering his wayward son, who is essentially misinformed about his origins and too skittish and insecure to receive this information directly. The Hitchockian element is quite strong here: the structure of the narrative gives to the reader the burdensome knowledge that a shortcut to all this misery is, throughout the narrative, at hand—if the son would just accept his father's

75. Watson, p. 85; T.9.17b.2.

76. Watson, p. 85; T.9.17b.10.

77. Watson, p. 85; T.9.17b.15.

78. On June 17, 2000, the *New York Times* ran as a front-page story the account of Claud Johnson trying to get the courts to accept his claim to be the only son of the great bluesman Robert Johnson. In lieu of DNA evidence, the court was swayed by an eyewitness narrative that could vouch for the moment of conception: a friend testified that she watched Robert Johnson and Claud's mother having sex in 1931. With this third person as the securing link to the past, the Mississippi supreme court granted Claud his claimed identity, with the rights to collect royalties from his father's estate.

narrative of their past he could leave off all this "shit-work"! Presumably, by giving the reader this sort of overview—the reader always knows what the son does not know—he or she will feel an urgency to find that shortcut back to the father and leave that hopelessly servile work-a-day economy behind. As with the burning house, we are left with the distinct desire to not be like one of *those* sons even as watching these father-son narratives makes us want to have their fathers. Thus, in terms of narrative seduction, readers are seduced by watching how seduction works on a facsimile of themselves, a facsimile with whom they only partially identify, retaining in that gap of self-proclaimed difference the desire to be seduced more directly and thereby save the long-suffering father trouble and degradation.

CONCLUSION

While it would be revealing to work through more chapters in the *Lotus Sūtra,* I believe I have offered enough material for recognizing the importance of father-son logic in this text as well as demonstrating the various tracks of seduction that the text employs in universalizing father-son connections and offering them to the reader so that he or she may consume them in the hope of reconstructing his or her identity. Equally important, we have seen how the narrative constructs the reader's desire for truth and authenticity to circle around the narrative itself and the text that contains it. No longer is truth in the traditional forms of Buddhist doctrine, such as the four truths or the three marks, nor is it in the stalwart figures of the arhats and other reliable figures from the earliest days of Buddhism. Final truth is not even in the old buddhas such as Dīpaṃkara and Maitreya, who are but students of the *Lotus Sūtra,* whose scope and strength pale in comparison. Without a doubt, all those previous sites of sanctity have been demoted and absorbed by the *Lotus Sūtra* and its new explanation of final truth and "real" Buddhist paternity.

Equally clear in this maneuver, the *Lotus Sūtra* has shifted sanctity into a new medium—textuality. Though relic worship is recommended in some of the passages in chapters 2 and 3, still this does not compare to receiving and upholding the *Lotus Sūtra,* and surely never was it said that one found one's true sonship to the Buddha through relic worship. Similarly, no ethical action compares with maintaining a worshipful attitude toward the *Lotus Sūtra,* with the corollary that there is no greater sin than disparaging or slandering the text. Obviously, there is now really only one final source for value in the universe, and it is the *Lotus Sūtra* as text, the text that came pouring out of that ancient lineage of twenty thousand buddhas and eventually led to the production of the buddhas that we had known so well before, even if we did not understand their place in the history of the *Lotus Sūtra,* a history that is essentially a history of the cosmos even as it is "our" own history too.

In short, I think we should conclude that the *Lotus Sūtra,* as an altogether brilliant and sustained narrative (at least through these early chapters), was designed to hollow out and subsume into itself traditional Buddhism, which presumably had grown up around a monastic order, with a body of formal rituals, a plethora of doctrinal positions, and captivating collections of narratives of its own. Equally important, this audacious switching of fathers is even more effective since the textual rhetoric that accomplishes this switch can then ground tradition and authority in its own physical presence, thus, in effect, becoming its own self-standing institution. And, as argued above, this complex self-presentation of itself only works when the textuality of the text disappears into itself even as it later appears as the solution to all the rhetoric that it holds. In the case of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the rhetoric of rhetoric's salvific physicality appears in chapter 10, ironically titled "Dharma Teacher," which seems to cap this narrative sequence of reconverting traditional Buddhist figures that began with Śāriputra and ends with Ānanda and Rāhula.

Early in chapter 10, the narrative offers its own physical presence as the sublime replacement for the Buddha's presence and as the key for actualizing tradition by granting to those who accept and traffic in the text the title of bodhisattva and promising that they will in time certainly become buddhas:[79]

> The Buddha said to Medicine King: "In addition, if after the Tathāgata has passed into extinction there should be someone who listens to the *Sūtra on the Lotus-like Miraculous Law (miaofa hua jing),* even one verse or one phrase, and for a moment thinks of it with joy, I will likewise bestow on him a prophecy that he will attain unsurpassed enlightenment. Again if there are persons who accept *(shouchi),* read *(dusong),* expound *(jieshuo),* and copy *(shuxie)* the *Sūtra on the Lotus-like Miraculous Law,* even only one verse and look upon this Sūtra with the same reverence as they would the Buddha, presenting various offerings of flowers, incense, necklaces, powdered incense, paste incense[,] . . . then you should understand that such persons have already offered alms to a hundred thousand million buddhas and in the place of the buddhas have fulfilled their great vow."

In this passage that so clearly aims to overcome the gap of time between the reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the apparently long-deceased Buddha, we have extravagant promises for seducing the reader into taking up the text itself as the encapsulation of tradition and the Buddha's presence. This sort of promise is rendered in an even clearer light in the following paragraph when ownership of the text is explained as the grounds for being treated like a buddha:[80]

79. Watson, p. 161, with minor changes; T.9.30c.7.
80. Watson, p. 161, with minor changes; T.9.30c.15.

> Medicine King, if someone should ask what living beings will be able to attain buddhahood in future existences *(weilai shi),* then you should show him that all these people in the future existences are certain to attain buddhahood. Why? Because if good men and good women accept, read, expound, and copy the *Sūtra on the Lotus-like Miraculous Law,* even one phrase of it, offer various kinds of alms to the Sūtra, flowers, incense, necklaces, powdered incense, etc.[,] . . . then these persons will be looked up to and honored by all the world. Alms will be offered to them such as would be offered to the Tathāgata. You should understand that these persons are great bodhisattvas who have succeeded in attaining unsurpassed enlightenment.

The richness of this kind of promise, with its clear attempt to collapse history, tradition, and buddha-presence into the text and its faithful proponents, represents an indisputable example of the endgame at work in organizing the *Lotus Sūtra*'s agenda and its place in tradition. Clearly, though the *Lotus Sūtra* is intent on gutting tradition, as it had taken shape in the era some five hundred years after the death of the Buddha Śākyamuni, it still has the conservative agenda of resuturing Buddhists to the "core" of the tradition, albeit now completely reformulated and available only through reading, copying, and worshiping this very narrative that does not hesitate to have the Buddha "speak" of its objectified textual presence, a presence that allows for "the cult of the text" and which promises to control and maintain authenticity and integrity in tradition.

What is of particular interest here is this dialectical play of immaculate authority that morphs from textual rhetoric into the narrative-Buddha's "orality," an orality that then explains a new form of immaculate sonship that it supports by immaculately lodging its own essence-as-father back in that textualized form of rhetoric that the son-to-be is holding. When this alchemy of language is ignored by the reader, then the text's rhetoric succeeds in the difficult task of creating pure paternity on either side of the narrative—in the "speaking" Buddha and in the reader. Moreover, and this strikes me as sublimely brilliant, the narrative then has those textual fathers offer themselves to the reading "sons," in a most sanctifying of unions, via the very thing that created them and held them apart—the physical text with its rhetoric of fathers and son and its seductive plan for rejoining them around itself.

Or to put it slightly differently, with paternal discourse now being self-consciously fashioned on a textual surface, and the above two quotations leave no doubt about that, the narrative has asked the reader to find the fullest form of closure with that nonlinguistic vehicle that holds the rhetoric in time—the text's physical presence. Thus, in seeing how the real author so deftly created and manipulated father figures throughout these early chapters, might we not also speculate that this author discovered that the unspeakable and utterly nonlinguistic Real that has to be imagined behind

every patriarchy for it to be convincing, could be, rather conveniently, imagined right behind the text's rhetoric on those very palm leaves that received the orthography? In sum, the brilliance of this maneuver is that as the rhetoric of fathers and sons breaks down the problem of time and mediacy in tradition, another line of rhetoric works to lodge (new) tradition qua paternal essence in the physicality of the text so that the rhetoric of fathers and sons now has a physical, even somatic carriage in which to ride forward in time. Thus access to timeless authenticity came with a system to survive and even thrive in time.

If I am right in expecting this level of ingenuity from the author—and after thinking through the wiles of the subplot of the twenty thousand buddhas, or either of the father-son parables treated in this chapter, I am fully ready to imagine this kind of authorial prowess—then we are justified in speaking of the "text as father" in a double sense that allows for orthography to be reproductive in both form and content as in the case of the statement, "This sentence was written with 14k gold." The difference, and it is a huge difference, is that gold exists, whereas paternity in the sense that the *Lotus Sūtra* is intending only exists when you think it does and thus requires such an elaborate rhetorical framework to make it seem naturally always-already present.

Let us now turn to the *Diamond Sūtra* to look at another template for subsuming total value and locating it in the thoroughly self-conscious and fetishized object of the text.

4

"Be All You Can't Be" and Other Gainful Losses in the *Diamond Sūtra*

OVERVIEW

Just as the seductive literary strategies of the *Lotus Sūtra* became clearer through a sustained narrative analysis, I hope to show that the *Diamond Sūtra* is a suitable text for a similar kind of close reading that takes into account the basic plotline of the work, the various kinds of self-imposed "needs" of the discourse, and the multiple subject-sites that it creates for the reader to desire, inhabit, and reproduce.[1] Like the *Lotus Sūtra,* it is suffused with alarming negations of "normal" Buddhism in which the dismissal of traditional Buddhism appears as part of a larger arc designed to convince the reader to convert to a vastly improved form of Buddhist truth and value. The end point of this arc of conversion is, again like the *Lotus Sūtra,* to take the text-as-object as the totality of tradition and to embrace its rhetoric as the sole avenue for gaining authenticity. However, in lieu of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s clever, multilayered parables and the sophisticated narratives within narratives, the *Diamond Sūtra* develops this conversion process with straightforward negative dialectics.

In fact, all in all, the *Diamond Sūtra* seems rather primitive. In addition to being fairly short (roughly twenty pages in English), it has a minimum of plot structure, a near-absence of action, and few overt metaphors or similes. Actually, aside from some important framing at the beginning and at the two endings, the text is essentially a haphazard list of negations since each new topic brought up for negation appears with no introduction and bears little or no relationship to the preceding topic.[2] In fact, it is hard to avoid the

1. An early version of this chapter was first given at the University of Oregon in July 1998; a revised version was given to Harvard University's Buddhist Studies Forum in November 1998.

2. It seems likely that the *Diamond Sūtra*'s various topics, which seem so unconnected, can be found throughout the first three chapters of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines,* where they have a bit more coherency.

introductory comment that as a piece of literature, the *Diamond Sūtra* is, despite its name, a rather poor text that relies almost exclusively on rabbit-punch declarations that disrupt and reorganize Buddhist authority and value. The challenge, then, is to understand how by deploying these brief but bewildering negations of prior forms of Buddhism the author manages to convince the reader that the essence of Buddhism is within its own textual borders.

The overall simplicity of the *Diamond Sūtra* has led scholars to locate it early in the history of Mahāyāna literature, and there is general agreement that it was probably written shortly before or after the beginning of the common era. This is quite reasonable, though the text seems to have two clearly discernible sections.[3] Roughly halfway through the discourse, the narrative turns to close as Subhūti asks the Buddha by what name this discourse is to be known, a gesture used throughout Mahāyāna literature to mark the close of a teaching.[4] Though the Buddha answers Subhūti's question regarding the title of the work, thereby effectively sealing the teaching, the text runs on to develop an extensive second section. In this second section much is repeated from the first section but with small twists and embellishments, giving the impression that the second half of the text is in a vague manner trying to write commentary on the first half. Furthermore, the second half includes Subhūti's tearful conversion to the text, as well as the specific distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna versions of the Law, polemics absent in the first half, suggesting a more advanced self-aware Mahāyāna position.[5]

The absence of this more divisive vocabulary in the first half might mean several things, but at the very least the first half of text, as far as its own categories are concerned, does not represent a clear sectarian break from earlier forms of Buddhism, though it negates and reconstitutes several choice items from the Buddhist tradition and produces a definition of bodhisattva-identity that upsets pre-Mahāyāna notions of bodhisattvahood.[6] Thus,

3. Edward Conze laments that the second half is so much more jumbled than the first, but in fact the first half is quite jumbled as well. Also, he does not clearly state what he believes to be the relationship between the first and second parts. See Edward Conze, trans., *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra* (1973; Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1975), pp. 51–52.

4. T.8.750a.11ff.

5. One passage makes a distinction between those Buddhists who accept this text and its dialectics and those who are fond of the "little Law" (*le xiaofa zhe* T.8.750c.18), who cling to prenegation concepts of being, and who cannot accept this text. Similarly, the term "Mahāyāna" is only used in the second half of the *Diamond Sūtra* (T.8.750c.13).

6. Also, all the Buddhist categories of identity that are employed are found in pre-Mahāyāna works ("stream-enterer," etc.). Similarly, the Buddha's main interlocutor, Subhūti, keeps his traditional pre-Mahāyāna title of being "Foremost in Noncontention" (*Araṇāviharin*) and never is reassigned a Mahāyāna identity such as bodhisattva, nor is he overtly rebirthed as a "*real* son of the Buddha," though presumably his conversion in the second half of the text is displayed to demonstrate just this kind of promotion even if it isn't overtly named.

though it is not essential to my larger arguments, I suspect that the second section was written slightly later than the first, a gap in time that might offer some evidence for imagining developing trends in Mahāyāna rhetoric. For reasons of space, I treat only the first half of the text here, which still allows me to pursue the basic agenda of the text.

Despite the *Diamond Sūtra*'s prominence in the Mahāyāna tradition, in particular in East Asian Buddhism, oddly enough there is little modern critical literature on the text. This is especially surprising given that the *Diamond Sūtra* holds the special privilege of being the first book in the world to be printed on woodblock (in China, in 868), again suggesting the power of its rhetoric. Equally surprising is that standard textbooks on Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as Paul Williams's *Mahāyāna Buddhism,* barely mention it.[7] Similarly Hirakawa Akira's *History of Indian Buddhism* does little more than list the text in the group of Perfection of Wisdom works.[8]

Against this relative lack of discussion in Occidental Buddhist studies, Gregory Schopen has given us two valuable contributions for thinking about the *Diamond Sūtra.* In 1989 he provided a much more reliable translation from the Sanskrit and clarified a number of problems in previous readings of the text.[9] And fifteen years earlier he published an original and insightful essay on the passage in the sūtra that equates worship of the text with worship of the Buddha or his relics.[10] This early essay by Schopen, along with numerous other later ones on the nature of early Mahāyāna Buddhism, has overturned much of what we had thought was reliable information regarding this period of Buddhism. One could easily say that in the wake of Schopen's work we have not quite known what to do next in order to rewrite a narrative for this important phase of Buddhist history. For my part, I have benefited greatly from Schopen's reflections on the *Diamond Sūtra*'s claim to be like a *stūpa* or *caitya,* but I am interested in reading the

7. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 41–42, for his very brief remarks.

8. See Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna,* trans. Paul Groner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), p. 277. A more interesting appraisal of the text's content and function appeared in an adventuresome article published in 1983 by Gerald Doherty who presented the text's position as little different than a kind of postmodern decontruction; see his "Form is Emptiness: Reading the Diamond Sūtra," *Eastern Buddhist* 16, no. 2 (autumn 1983): 114–23. Though I believe a closer reading of the text reveals that it works the opposite of Doherty's presentation, still his essay is interesting and provocative and represents one of the few attempts to theorize the power and attraction of this work.

9. For his translation from the Gilgit manuscript, see his "The Gilgit Manuscript of the Vajracchedikā," in *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle,* ed. Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan Silk (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 89–139.

10. See his "The Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*' in the *Vajracchedikā:* Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): 148–81.

text in a more literary manner that sets that particular claim in the context of the other rhetorical gestures that constitute the text.

Negative Dialectics

In addition to the complications presented by its apparent two-part textual structure, the difficulty of interpreting the *Diamond Sūtra* lies in assessing the role of its negative rhetoric. How shall we read statements that seem intent on moving Buddhist items in and out of being? For instance, the following exchange is fairly characteristic of the text's use of negative dialectics:[11]

> The Buddha said to Subhūti, "What do you think? Do bodhisattvas adorn buddha lands or not?"
>
> Subhūti said, "No, World Honored One. Why? Adorning buddha lands is actually not adorning buddha lands, and thus is called, 'adorning buddha lands.'"

What could this kind of language be accomplishing in the text, and on what authority? In response to these basic questions, I suggest that we gain the most by locating this kind of negative rhetoric within the larger goal of seducing the reader into accepting a new form of Buddhism that is constituted, like the *Lotus Sūtra,* as an "overview" or "meta-view" of traditional Buddhism. Read in this manner that looks for a plotline and an overall engagement with tradition, the text, contrary to some modern opinions, seems dedicated to producing closure and establishing firm claims to value and legitimacy, even in the wake of dangerous-sounding rhetoric. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, I am suggesting that this dangerous-sounding language of negation is the most important part of relocating closure and authority, a point that obviously has implications for how we read negative rhetorics throughout Mahāyāna literature, be it in Tantric Buddhism or in Chan and Zen.

What is crucial to this reading strategy is to see that objectifying and critiquing tradition simultaneously requires and produces higher levels of authority, vision, and memory. Put this way, it is not that the text begins with an assumed foundation of authority and then produces a critique of traditional authority based on that foundation. Rather, the text's authority is produced through the very process in which traditional authority is overcome by the text's rhetoric in a way that then allows the text to gather up that authority and reinstall it in itself. To accomplish this task of reconstituting authority around itself, the narrative stages a supposedly historical event in which the Buddha gives a discourse that radically unhinges the straightforward categories and conditions that made tradition sensible. Then, when

11. T.8.749c.18.

this undermining discourse and its required authority are firmly established, this narratively produced Buddha turns to pour his authority and this newly revealed "overview" on tradition into the very textual space that he is inhabiting.

Sameness with a Vengeance

Given what we have just seen in the *Lotus Sūtra,* reading the *Diamond Sūtra* for its reengineering of authority should not seem odd. However, though the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* share a passion for reworking traditional authority, the *Lotus Sūtra* effects conversion to its own definition of authority through doubling Buddhist patriarchy and sonship, whereas the *Diamond Sūtra* works more tightly around doubling negation. In fact, it seems that in the *Diamond Sūtra,* traditional Buddhism as a system of negation declaring no permanence, no satisfaction, no real presence, no place in the at-home lineage, and so on, is itself treated to a process of negation. Thus, according to the *Diamond Sūtra,* there are no real teachings from the Buddha, no real Buddhists, no Buddha to be recognized by his marks, no real arhats or other stages of sainthood, and so on. The traditional Buddhist acts of negation, both social and "philosophic," which had been the source for identity as a Buddhist, are now themselves the targets of negation in the process of producing a higher form of Buddhist identity—the bodhisattva identity—which the text is from the beginning intent on constructing, controlling, and doling out to the faithful reader.

To put it pithily, according to the *Diamond Sūtra,* one is only an authentic Buddhist by being Buddhist about being Buddhist. Thus one has to renounce one's prior identity as a renouncer in order to regain a stepped-up version of that prior identity. Looked at in this manner, both the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* depend on the reader being drawn into a process of autocritique that takes the originally cherished forms of Buddhist identity and authority to task in order to produce a higher, postnegation form of those items and a new center of authority that controls those new forms of identity. In fact, applying this negative rhetoric to tradition in order to create a new zone of authority seems essential to reconstructing a facsimile of the sanctified presence of the Buddha five hundred years after his death and securing access to that presence via the recently discovered medium of textuality. Thus despite the initial emphasis on "lack," the rhetorical act of negation is richly productive of authority, presence, and power, especially when it turns on just those items: authority, presence, and power.

An essential part of this claim to contain the presence of the Buddha is to assert that the text is larger, ontically, than tradition and the buddhas within tradition. Thus the text has Śākyamuni pay homage to the text claiming, "Subhūti, all the buddhas and all the teachings (dharmas) of unsur-

passed bodhi come from *(chu)* this sūtra."[12] Once this has been said, it is clear that the text is presenting itself as a kind of primal matrix for the buddhas and reversing the order of importance such that the text overtakes the buddhas as the primary—in both senses of the word—cause of Buddhism. Hence, this text, like the *Lotus Sūtra,* asserts itself as the be-all and end-all of Buddhism, the final matrix behind all truth and value.

Positioning itself in this manner, the text legitimizes itself as something superior to the speaking Buddha, even as it also offers itself to the reader as exactly what was delivered to the buddhas—the *Diamond Sūtra.* Thus by reading and believing this mini-lineage that the text gives of itself, the reader imagines himself directly in touch with that which supposedly made tradition. Of course, this exciting possibility is only "within reach" through a confusion between the actual *Diamond Sūtra* and its mythologic *ur*-form, a confusion that tempts the reader into imagining that, in a way, he is even moving past the Buddha and getting directly at that which makes buddhas and tradition.

To clarify the doubling at work in the text, we should note that, like an Escher painting, what is coming out of the text is a buddha who explains that buddhas come out of this text, and yet this very explanation *is the text,* which goes on to claim the Buddha as its descendant. Clearly the buddha as child of the text is still required to be its paternal-author, and thus authority is in an impossible circle of self-production. As we saw so many times in the *Lotus Sūtra,* this kind of paradox is the effect of the text working on itself as subject and object, a process further complicated as the text seeks to mediate this confrontation by employing the Buddha as its spokesperson and guarantor, even as the text claims to precede his existence and to format his being. This circularity is also the effect of critiquing tradition in a manner that still relies on tradition to ensure its legitimacy.

By setting up a reading that is interested in understanding these self-reflexive gestures, I am arguing that the goal of generating this kind of "overview" of tradition is to gain direct access to the origins of tradition in order that those origins might be domesticated within the physicality of the text and brought to bear on the current reading moment. Naturally, if we locate the text's fundamental problematic within the uncertainty that seems to have marked Buddhism some five hundred years after the death of the Buddha, then interpreting the dynamics of this rhetoric of authority-and-presence-through-negation ought to move from the appraisal that the text is simply about the emptiness of all things—the word *emptiness* never appears in the text—to a more incisive and comprehensive reading that appreciates how the *Diamond Sūtra* parasitically feeds on established Buddhist meaning

12. T.8.749b.23.

systems to develop a meta-level critique that it then tries to substantialize in the text's body and then offer to the reader as the fix-it-all for tradition.[13]

Reading about Reading

Against this literary approach that seeks to interpret negative dialectics as part of a larger claim to value, authority, and closure, we could simply accept this text and its abundant successes as an example of "crazy wisdom." Or, in a slightly more academic mode, we might assume that this is some inscrutable discourse fed on a Buddhist worldview that is only accessible via a mystical apprehension.[14] But to decide in favor of either of these appraisals would forfeit a chance to read carefully a text that asks not to be meditated on but to be read, recited, copied, and circulated—and, most of all, desired. Thus if we take the discourse on its own terms and resist superimposing on it a set of assumptions about its content that came later, we find some fascinating clues to the way early Mahāyāna rhetoric worked at undoing and redoing tradition around its own rhetoric and the textual vehicle that housed that rhetoric. In short, I think that by the end of this chapter the Mahāyāna aspects of this text will appear to have much less to do with unmotivated philosophic discussions of the Perfection of Wisdom or the need for cultivating compassion for all beings and much more to do with unusual topics such as destabilizing and aggrandizing the reading subject by making him party to the rejection of the old law, recovering the image and presence of the master through the thrill of negation, and the hysteria of being intimate with the Law in a potentially illegal manner.

Equally important, there can be little doubt that instead of pushing the reader into a direct perception of ultimate reality, the text is dedicated to creating and working over that complicated intersubjective field that is produced in the imagination of the reader as he bounces between viewpoints in the text that can be summed up as follows: (1) the Buddha who performs these negations and reconstitutions; (2) Subhūti, the aspiring bodhisattva, who faithfully receives this discourse; (3) the reader's pre–*Diamond Sūtra* self that is hollowed out and overcome in the Buddha's rhetoric; (4) the

13. In addition to the absence of the word *emptiness,* the text is also innocent of the part-whole analysis typically employed by Madhyamika writers to prove the emptiness of all things. I think Hubert Durt's discussion of emptiness in Mahāyāna and in this text in particular needs to be reconsidered; see his essay, "Daijō [Mahāyāna]," in *Hōbōgirin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1994), p. 772, where he reads the *Diamond Sūtra* "as little more developed [than the *Heart Sūtra*], [a text] also appreciated as a synthesis of the theory of emptiness." He goes on to argue that emptiness is one of the orthodoxies of Mahāyāna, though he admits it was well known in older Buddhism.

14. This is clearly Paul Williams's assessment in his comments on Perfection of Wisdom literature in his *Mahāyāna Buddhism,* pp. 37–45.

reader's new identity that is to unfold under the aegis of the *Diamond Sūtra;* and, finally, (5) all other beings to whom one ought to transmit this text. In short, the text only works when this pentagon of subject-positions is vividly created and then engaged to perform a series of fascinating tasks that produce images of transcendence and total value. The play of these positions is evident once we admit that the text is not merely an inert container or storehouse for Mahāyāna wisdom—wisdom that supposedly exists apart from language and literature—but rather that the text is the tool for creating the image of such a self-standing wisdom and, more important, creating desire for that wisdom and the partisan Mahāyāna identity that claims to own it. As usual, then, this form of seductive truth is only seductive insofar as it is positioned as something independent of the reader's desire and certainly not created in the triangle between rhetoric, reader, and proposed object of truth. Thus in a literary reading of these texts, we have to remain sensitive to the way they often require our involvement, overtly and covertly, for their truths and values to be bequeathed.

Patriarchy and Negation

Last among introductory points, we should not overlook the way the *Diamond Sūtra* explains that it is precisely lack or absence that is found in the moment when the two most recent "historical" buddhas meet, a moment that was regarded in traditional lore as that crucial link when one buddha recognized and legitimized the next in line. Midway through the *Diamond Sūtra,* the Buddha questions his interlocutor Subhūti:[15]

> The Buddha said to Subhūti, "What do you think? When the Tathāgata was where the Buddha Dīpaṃkara was, as for dharma (teaching), was there anything obtained *(yu fa you suode)*?"
>
> Subhūti said, "World Honored One, when the Tathāgata was where the Buddha Dīpaṃkara was, as for dharma, there was nothing that he *actually (shi)* obtained."

The way this passage is written suggests that the author expected some shock value in telling readers that a well-known moment of contact and transmission between the Buddha and his most important progenitor was actually void of content. Presumably the author imagined that readers knew of this epochal event that was regularly recounted as the hinge between past and present Buddhist truths and that they trusted it as that crucial place where sameness, perfection, and legitimacy were moved forward in time. By claiming that no specific teaching was *actually* obtained at this juncture, the author seems to delight in upsetting the expectation that something real

15. T.8.749c.16; emphasis added.

and substantial had to pass between these two perfect figures for this exchange to be consummated.

Without for the moment exploring that crucial distinction of levels marked by Subhūti's insertion of the word *actually* in his response, it is clear that this absence of teaching content at the moment of contact does not upset the presumed continuity between Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni for four reasons that are demonstrated in the text. First, and on a very basic level, hollowing out the transmission so that "as for dharma, there was nothing that he *actually* obtained" does not result in any change of either buddha's identity. With or without teaching content at that moment, the efficacy of their contact still remains in force, and the narrative does not imply that this negation put either of their identities in question since both keep their respective titles "Tathāgata/World Honored One" and "Buddha Dīpaṃkara." Second, the negation that is leveled at their exchange is a rather restricted one that preserves the formal quality of their relationship. Thus, though there is a negation of teaching content in their meeting, the text did not invite us to imagine scenarios that would be much more damaging to Buddhist piety, such as the possibility that the two buddhas never met, or that one mistook the other for an ordinary person, or, again, that one denounced the other as crazy or fraudulent. These travesties were not allowed into the text even as alternatives to be dismissed, and so the tracks of transmission remain pristine in avoiding these deleterious possibilities. Third, Śākyamuni, as narrator of this mini-story, is by his very account of this lack of content in transmission "proving" that he is a buddha, insofar as he alone knows what was and was not transacted so many eons ago. It is just this "all-seeing" ability to know content from noncontent that, throughout the text, is demonstrated as the privilege of a buddha.

Fourth, and probably most important, absence, lack, and nonobtainment had already been signaled in prior passages as the hallmark of the teachings of a buddha or sage, suggesting another odd sort of confusion over content and form wherein the very absence in the transmission between Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni is proof of their continuity. This lack, and presumably the understanding of it, then becomes the very thing expected in a transmission moment. Several passages earlier the text had shown the Buddha hollowing out a number of traditional concepts in just this manner when he stated, "The dharma that the Tathāgatas give are unobtainable *(bu kequ)* and ineffable *(bu keshuo)*. They are neither dharmas, nor non-dharmas. Why? *All worthy sages are distinguished by taking lack (wu) as their teaching/dharma.*"[16] This passage is telling because it marks the moment in the text when the author is essentially giving a new definition for buddhahood, a definition that he

16. T.8.749b.17; emphasis added.

apparently expected to disturb the reader's prior definition of buddhahood. Just as in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s definition of buddhas as those who traffic in metaphors and parables, this moment is essential because it effectively creates a second, higher-order definition of buddhahood such that the reader is finding out that what he took to be buddhahood was only one part of the "reality" of buddhahood. In reading this passage, the reader comes face-to-face with a complicated definition of buddhahood that requires him to hollow out the older definitions, just as the Buddha does, even as the older definitions hold still long enough to receive this dialectical abuse.

Of course, how exactly these two definitions of buddhahood fit together remains unexplained. Just on the surface, though, it would seem that the author is maintaining all the outer forms of buddhahood (the Buddha is an enlightened being, who teaches authoritatively, who had prior contact with Dīpaṃkara, etc.) and yet now adds a kind of overdrive aspect to that formal definition. Havoc is wrought simply because the new definition is constructed around a rhetoric of negation that can only work when it has something positive and substantial to work on, such as the transmission between Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni. In short, the author has created a new definition of buddhahood that gets its content from "eating" its form, even as it relies on that form for both pre- and postnegation perimeters. In the end the Buddha is still the Buddha, an enlightened being who teaches authoritatively, who had prior contact with Dīpaṃkara, and so on, but now he is a buddha enhanced by meeting this new qualification of "taking lack as his teaching" and applying it to himself and his lineage.

With lack or absence now posited as the hallmark of sagely teaching, buddha-identity seems to have shifted, within the minimalist narrative, to a kind of performance identity where we as readers are invited to gain confidence that this is a buddha talking precisely because he performs according to the definition that the text gave us: this buddha finds lack just where the rest of us nonsages were expecting something. Moreover, the author applies this new performative definition of the Buddha in such a manner that the Buddha can even turn to excavate the foundations of his old self, all in order to show his new, "real" self at work.

In a structural way, the author is having the Buddha reinterpret himself just as "sons of the Buddha" did in the *Lotus Sūtra:* both take their prior lines of closure to task and in that very act of negation and self-reflexivity acquire the new and enriched Mahāyāna identity. In this case, the Buddha's formal negation of part of the older definition of his identity in no way disturbs the successful reassertion of his buddha-identity. Instead, his identity has a new wrinkle in it that can only be understood by positing a higher level of appeal where "realities," such as transmission from Dīpaṃkara, are reassessed and differentiated from lower-level understandings by the word *actually.* As I argue in more detail below, the allure of this text derives precisely from this

movement to another sphere that is invisible and yet charged by the dialectical execution of older, piously held definitions of buddhas. Thus, again like the *Lotus Sūtra,* new content (this newly found lack in the Buddha's identity) is essentially defined as a higher view of older content.

As is probably evident, this structure of generating content by moving through a certain dialectical form is essentially parallel to the way patrilines of any sort are constructed. As I argued in chapter 1, the father claims to have the right to adjudicate identity and does so by passing prior identities through a negating process that removes prior attributes and affiliations, whereupon he inscribes identity in the new subject, along with the right to perform just this gesture of identity-through-negation on his own chosen subjects. Here, the author has the Buddha perform just this autonegation in front of Subhūti and the reader, presumably in an effort first to demonstrate his mastery over identity and negativity and second to tempt the reader into believing in a higher form of Buddhist understanding that doubles itself so that it can turn on itself to become itself. What is crucial here is that to recognize this act, and the higher level of authority that it requires, serves to differentiate more advanced Buddhists from those "lower," less sophisticated types who don't know of this "inside" line that restructures traditional items by turning them inside out.[17]

A CLOSE READING

The *Diamond Sūtra* opens with a standard sūtra setting; the Buddha is in the town of Śrāvastī in a garden with 1,250 great monks *(biqiu, bhikṣu)* who, interestingly, are not identified as Mahāyāna adherents, something that is usually emphasized in other Mahāyāna works. The first action occurs when, with no fanfare such as the amazing profusion of light that explodes from the Buddha's body at the beginning of many other Mahāyāna works, the Buddha, identified simply as "the World Honored One," gets up and goes to town to beg at the appropriate time, after donning his robes and taking up his bowl. In town, he begs "consecutively" *(zidi),* which means that he follows the vinaya requirement that monks not select the houses known to have better food to offer but instead visit houses indiscriminately. He returns, eats,

17. Slightly later in the chapter I discuss the degree to which this gesture and its presentation in literature constitutes irony, but for now let me note that the text is creating its in-group of bodhisattvas precisely around this ability to maintain a kind of double vision of the real. For comments on the way irony produces a sense of superiority in its consumption, see Søren Kirkegaarde, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual References to Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 265, cited in Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 29: irony "looks down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone; it travels in an exclusive incognito."

and, when finished, packs up his robes and bowl, washes his feet, and lays out his seat to sit on.

In this concise opening, the Buddha is shown as the paragon of Buddhist normalcy. He lives in normal historical time, at a certain place in a northern Indian town, and he adheres rather conscientiously to the rules of etiquette as described in the vinaya, the standard set of rules for all monastic Buddhists. Furthermore, except for the epithet "World Honored One" *(shizun),* there is nothing presented to distinguish his august identity from the other monks who presumably conduct their daily routines in a similar fashion. Also established in this introduction is a grounding of language in the image of steady ritual performance. This set piece of the perfect Buddhist day serves not just to anchor the coming disruption of the law in a very lawful context but also linguistically constitutes a buddha-body in a convincing way that moves the words from the text into the body of the Buddha. Thus, once this introduction has established an air of conservatism, the coming rhetorics of negation that upend traditional understandings will always have a securing, delimiting, and ultimately domesticating frame of reference. It is as if the narrative is saying, "Not to worry! All this comes out of the Buddha's body, and that body holds perfectly to the standard code of Buddhist ethics."

With the Buddha now fed, washed, and well situated on his mat, Venerable Subhūti stands up from the group of monks and in accordance with Buddhist decorum, puts his robe over his right shoulder, kneels with his right knee on the ground, and, with his hands clasped in supplication, asks the Buddha, "Precious World Honored One, you, the Tathāgata, are the one who rightly looks after *(hunian)* bodhisattvas and deputizes them *(fuzhu)*.[18] World Honored One, for a good son or daughter to give rise to unsurpassed bodhi mind, how must they abide, and how must they tame *(jiangfu)* their minds?"[19] In this opening question several important motifs are established that will be carried through to the end of the text. First, the author has set up a simple, two-person dialogue structure and chosen Subhūti to be the Buddha's interlocutor. Moreover, Subhūti is a well-known participant in older traditional texts, and he sometimes appears in Mahāyāna texts as a pivot person who renounces traditional positions that are to be reformed or abandoned. His identity as an icon-for-tradition is

18. *Fuzhu* often means to bestow legitimacy on someone or to give an identity or a teaching, or to give a charge, and is regularly used that way in Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra,* or *Vimalakīrti.* Here, however, there is no object being transacted, and since in the next passage it is clear that the Buddha is assigning bodhisattvas the task of saving all sentient beings, in his name, I have followed Brook Ziporyn's suggestion that "deputize" might best characterize the meaning of *fuzhu* here.

19. T.8.748c.24.

reinforced by the chosen term of address, "venerable" *(zhanglao),* which is the standard term for non-Mahāyāna monks in Mahāyāna texts. Having a traditional figure as the main interlocutor in a Mahāyāna work may be disconcerting, but he seems to be positioned here as a stalwart and reliable Buddhist monk who has heard of Mahāyāna ideals but is as yet uncertain how to enter into that world. By picking Subhūti as the Buddha's interlocutor, the author is again employing traditional form to house new content.

Although the introduction specified that there are only monks in the garden, Subhūti asks about what a "good son or good daughter" ought to do to give rise to unsurpassable enlightenment. This phrase destabilizes the dramatis personae to some degree since it renders superfluous the special identity of the monks in attendance—they are getting teachings that are apparently suitable for all people, not just the clergy. Furthermore, it even allows that some aspiring bodhisattvas are female, thereby ignoring the monks' masculinity, the other defining characteristic of the audience. Thus the author has positioned his discussion in an awkward mismatch of an open teaching given to an overly selected audience. It turns out that the only characters allowed onstage in this drama are male and monkly, and thus the question of the inclusion of laity and women remains uncertain. Perhaps the text is fishing for a wider base of support but is not brave enough to include laity and women onstage to personally receive teachings and statements of their inclusion.

Obviously, this opening question focuses on the figure of the bodhisattva. Though none of the monks have been identified as bodhisattvas, and none will be, Subhūti's brief description of the Buddha focuses exclusively on the Buddha's relationship to this special class of Buddhists. The Buddha looks out for bodhisattvas and gives them the power to act on his behalf in a way that he does not extend to normal monks or other Buddhists, a possibility that non-Mahāyāna monks might find rather disturbing. In short, this opening question makes clear that there is a special in-group within the Buddhist group, and they are known to have a special connection with the Buddha that grants them his protection and the right to act on his behalf. Equally salient in this opening question is the intention to clarify the rules for entrance into this special group of bodhisattvas. Subhūti, though he would have been recognized by the traditional reader as a tried and true traditional Buddhist, finds himself an uninformed outsider wishing to know how he ought to conduct himself and train his mind with the hope that these acts of self-discipline will win him inclusion in the ranks of bodhisattvas. So, set within an already well-circumscribed Buddhist group, the question arises about the gateway into another selected, and clearly preferred, category of Buddhists.

As the discussion evolves, Subhūti appears to be brought into this bodhisattva sphere as the author gradually lets him give some of the Buddha's

lines. In effect, we are watching the education of Subhūti, and thus when he has a tearful conversion experience in the second half of the text, we as readers are shown the appropriate response to this discourse.[20] Thus, after carefully circumscribing a lawful and traditional perimeter, the text has created yet another guarded interior space constituted by the group of bodhisattvas that is superior to other Buddhists and is personally policed by a buddha, who, though a master of normal old-style Buddhist law, also gives the rules for securing this new identity. Thus, in effect, we see the text creating a new Buddhism within an old Buddhism, just as the *Lotus Sūtra* did.

The value of being included in this in-group will soon be explained by the text, but the form of the narrative has already nudged the reader in this direction. The text moves the reader's eyes from viewing a nameless and second-rate group of Buddhists, the 1,250 monks, to hearing firsthand the words of Subhūti, a named figure, in personal dialogue with the Buddha, asking about joining the select group. As Subhūti stands up from the undistinguished multitude we, as readers, stand with him, or perhaps slightly behind him, listening to a conversation that presumably will affect us just as it affects Subhūti.

Notably, the narrator of this dialogue is completely absent and does not intrude in the relationship that will be developed among Subhūti, the Buddha, and the reader. Though the first line of the text announces in traditional form, "Thus I heard," the narrator disappears until the closing lines. Hence the narrative, while obviously a composition, is attempting to present its content as a historical, oral moment, unaffected by the medium that it inhabits. Slipping from awareness of a constructed narrative into the impression of unadulterated orality presumably brings the reader more intimately into the discussion and obviates addressing both problematic sides of narrative composition: the authorial work in bringing the Real into narrative-textual form and then the reader's hazardous work of interpreting that discourse. On a more basic level, this slide also allows that narrative can perfectly duplicate past events. If there were interspersed several statements from the narrator such as "as best I can remember," or "and here a dog barked and I missed a phrase," or again, "this next part of the discussion was boring, so I shortened it to save palm leaves," the text would touch the reader quite differently. The studied effacement of the narrator gives the

20. The second part of the text opens with this conversion, giving the impression that if we are right in imagining a second author, then he read the first part of the text just as I have: a text designed to promote conversion, and consequently he thought it apt to dramatize that conversion. The text reads, "At this time as Subhūti was hearing this sūtra he profoundly understood its meaning and intention *(shenjie yi qu)* and wept, tearfully saying to the Buddha, 'Rare it is, World Honored One, for the Buddha to teach a text *(jingdian)* as profound as this. Since I attained the Eye of Wisdom, I have never heard such a sūtra as this one.' "

illusion that spoken words were transmitted perfectly into narrative and then into written words, with no subsequent shift in form, content, or meaning. As mentioned above, this seduction from textuality to textuality's orality is particularly interesting given the way that this orality will soon speak of itself in textualized form.

Equally effaced is the presence of the reader. The text obviously assumes a reading audience, and as we will see, is obsessed with winning the reader's confidence, but the author never addresses the reader with comments that would reveal such a relationship. Comments that would bring this relationship into full view, such as "This next section is really important" or "Don't confuse this with what was said earlier" are absent. This again gives the impression of an immaculate and unmotivated transmission, completed once in the past and thoroughly innocent of attempts to influence the reader in the present.

Arguably, then, the text generates desire for itself, in part, through the illusion of being a text without desire. The text, with its oral style promoting the illusion of the pure, singular moment of spoken discourse, cloaks its incipient greed, which, nonetheless, will soon be manifest in repeated injunctions for the reader to take the text to be the absolute best thing in the world. Presumably, if the author were to let the reader think that he needed anything from the reader, he would break the reader's expectation that truth (1) comes from beyond intersubjective entanglements and (2) should never be dependent on the receiver labeling the teaching as true. In short, seduction works best when seduction is denied. The text, by hiding the writer and the reader and their reciprocal relationship, produces the image of a "pure annunciation" without intervening editing and sculpting-for-reception, thereby making it seem like the medium and its manipulator are completely without ideological or polemical intent, and this purity makes the text all the more attractive.

In place of an overt author-reader relationship, it turns out that Subhūti is made to play the proxy for the reader so that the Buddha talks to *him* about the text-qua-text, telling him of its marvelous value, its powers, the name it should be called, and how it should be received. Thus, with this question-and-answer format, the author is applying a kind of puppeteer's technique, assuming the role of both the Buddha and the reader and positioning Subhūti and the other nameless monks as a surrogate audience, thereby avoiding having to acknowledge that the entire "puppet show" is directed to the reading audience.

Following Subhūti's initial query, the Buddha commends him for this question about bodhisattvas and gives this answer:[21]

21. T.8.749a.5.

> The Buddha said, "All bodhisattvas, the great beings *(mahāsattvas),* should in this way tame their minds: All sentient beings of every class—be they born from eggs, wombs, moisture, or magically *(huasheng)*—and regardless of whether they exist with form or without form, or with consciousness *(youxiang),* or without consciousness *(wuxiang)* or, again, lacking consciousness *(fei youxiang),* or lacking the lack of consciousness *(fei wuxiang),* all, I cause to enter nirvana without remainder *(wu yu niepan),* [fully] extinguished *(miedu).* Thus, I nirvanize *(miedu)* limitless, countless, boundless, sentient beings, but actually *(shi),* there are no sentient beings who achieve extinction. Why? Subhūti, if a bodhisattva had [in mind] the mark of self, the mark of person, the mark of sentient being, or the mark of living being, then he or she would not be a bodhisattva.

At least three interesting things are established in this passage. First, the scope of Buddhist action is universalized and extended to engage, eventually, all creatures. None will escape the nirvanizing power of the bodhisattva since all beings are on a Buddhist trajectory, whether or not they admit it. The extension of this telos to all creatures is drummed in by the recitation of two traditional lists of sentient beings, one that classifies them by birth processes, the other by the station they occupy in a meticulously stratified cosmos. Thus, as a gateway, this passage instills in the believing reader the confidence that all other subjects in the universe either agree with the reader and the Buddha or are simply wrong about the way things are.

Second, the bodhisattva's spiritual destiny is defined by his relationship to the destiny of others. As the Buddha deputizes bodhisattvas to be his agents of salvation, there is implicitly a doubling or even tripling of destinies. While the rest of sentient beings in the universe apparently remain passive and are simply nirvanized by the bodhisattvas, bodhisattvas seem to have an endless task in front of them, while the Buddha appears impassive and inactive. The bodhisattva's future, then, is caught between two levels: the passive sentient beings on whom he is to work and the passive, law-giving Buddha, for whom he is to work.

The third interesting element in the above passage is fairly convoluted but represents one of the more dynamic tropes in the text. It seems that crossing the line separating bodhisattvas from the rest of sentient beings is to be understood ironically, and by this I mean that membership requires maintaining a split vision of reality. I consider this rhetoric ironic not only because it maintains a dual vision of "the Real" but also because it involves an involuting logic whereby the identity of being a bodhisattva is predicated on one's attitude toward identity itself.[22] Thus, bodhisattvas, as a class of

22. Though I like Booth's definition of irony as he presents it in *The Rhetoric of Irony,* his position is not as applicable to the realm of Mahāyāna texts. Booth holds that irony constructs a special sense of intimacy between writer and reader as the reader is confronted with ostensibly

beings, are defined precisely as those beings that do not hold a view of beings, even as they take those beings to be the focus of their activity. In other words, one gains (bodhisattva) identity by casting away (sentient being) identity. Or even more starkly, difference is promised to those who can renounce difference, and this seems particularly agonizing since the text is dedicated to creating the desire for just that difference of this new identity. Worse than the command that enlightenment can simply be won by not thinking of white elephants, bodhisattvahood is based here on the double bind to "be all you can't be." This motif returns later in the text when, as mentioned above, it is said that buddhas are distinguished "by taking lack as their teaching (dharma)," with "lack" here still adequately serving as something present and real enough to be recognized as the Something that is the same among the teachings of all buddha-figures.

Looked at differently, the requirements for being a bodhisattva in this opening exchange require that the reader first accept the Buddha as a benevolent master signifier to whom one should offer one's identity for negation, all with the understanding that there will be a compensatory identity of greater value won once this sacrifice has been made.[23] The bodhisattva bid to move upward therefore remains rather tentative as it always involves the denial of one's ground in the face of a totally inscrutable master. Thus the transcendent bodhisattva-identity that the text offers comes with a rather large drain plug. Here, no bodhisattva could ever claim to be a bodhisattva and not run the risk of being emptied, as that comes part and parcel with the identity.

Though the author seems to have no qualms about producing this kind of anxiety over identity, it is crucial to note that the Buddha's identity as a legitimating agent in this dialectical process is never at risk. Though in a few

impossible contradictions that require him to seek out a "higher" reading that will render the contradictions meaningful, thereby forming a special bond with an author who had prepared for his reader such an exit from the level of the obvious, and trusted that he would find his way to the author's "true" intention. Part of that definition works well here: clearly the contradictions that the Buddha is offering to Subhūti involve the promise that there is a way to resolve them and it can be found in moving upward to a new intimacy with the "author" qua Buddha. The problem is that the real writing author isn't interested in generating intimacy with the reader, instead he is interested in deceiving the reader into thinking that by reading he is gaining intimacy with the Buddha, surely not with the author. This intent to deceive pushes the text beyond what Booth allows for irony, since he writes, "I must ignore all acts of deliberate deception, even though in some definitions they would be considered ironic: e.g. flattery and other hyperbole not designed to be seen through . . . advertising euphemisms; plain lies" (p. 21). Thus the text in fact cannot be ironic in Booth's sense, since it is completely deceptive. Still the word *irony* works well to convey the split vision so apparent in the *Diamond Sūtra*'s rhetoric.

23. This line of investigation is particularly valuable since this entire rhetoric is taking place within a text created by an author who did this very thing, but in a slightly different manner: he canceled his own identity to adopt the Buddha's and, less dramatically, Subhūti's.

passages the Buddha will question the reality of his own teachings, this self-questioning seems to be autocauterizing and never erodes his power as the master signifier of his meta-system. Far from being self-undermining, it does the opposite as it reaffirms his position as the one in charge of all drain plugs, the one who does not need to sacrifice his being to another in order to regain it. Like all absolute masters, he alone stands alone.

In more ontological terms, the reader has to face a radical abyss in pursuing his desire to be a bodhisattva since he will always lack being, never mind status, and only gains a temporary measure of either in an always uncertain quid pro quo exchange with a being whose being is not in question. The inequality of this setup can be easily noticed in the way that the Buddha's care of bodhisattvas never comes under review in the way that the bodhisattvas' care of sentient beings does. Thus, in essence, the son has to do what the father does not, to be recognized as legitimate by the father.

In the next section the Buddha continues to answer Subhūti's question:[24]

> "Moreover, Subhūti, bodhisattvas must not abide anywhere in dharmas (things) when they practice giving. It is also called 'giving while not abiding in form' and 'giving while not abiding in sounds, smells, tastes, touches, or (mental) images *(fa)*.'[25] Subhūti, a bodhisattva must give in this fashion, not abiding in signs *(bu zhu yu xiang)*. Why? Because if a bodhisattva gives while not abiding in signs, his merit will be inconceivable *(bu ke siliang)*. Subhūti, what do you think, is the space of the eastern direction conceivable?"
>
> "No, World Honored One."
>
> "Subhūti, what about the space in the south, west, north, and up and down, are they conceivable?"
>
> "No, they also aren't, World Honored One."
>
> "Subhūti, the merit of giving, when practiced by a bodhisattva who doesn't abide in signs is just like this [space]—inconceivable. Subhūti, a bodhisattva thus must abide according to this teaching."

In this part of the answer, the author has the Buddha give some idea of what bodhisattvas ought to be doing. It turns out that they ought to be doing what other Buddhists regularly do—make donations. The difference, and it is presented as a huge difference, is the ability to perform these deeds while not abiding in signs. Bodhisattvas are to practice standard Buddhist actions while maintaining a mental state that is defined by the absence of signifiers of all types. As a reward for this self-imposed renunciation of the reality of his virtuous action, the Buddha promises Subhūti that the bodhisattva will be handsomely repaid.

24. T.8.749a.12.

25. This list clarifies the first line in the above passage, "giving while not abiding in dharmas" by substantiating it into the standard list of six types of objects *(dharmas)* that one might contact.

At first this compensation seems paradoxical in that it promises to mark what was to be a deed without marks, since clearly it promises the inscription of value in the account of such a bodhisattva, provided that he renounces all rights to the process of inscription. The paradoxical nature of this promise recedes when we see that this bodhisattva is actually being asked to accomplish a much more complicated task that involves several levels of trust and submission. On the most basic level, he submits to the text that explains to him the effects of such self-voiding actions by showing him, through the trusted eyes of the knowing master, the effects of such deeds. In short, once he renounces any prior system of value and recognition in favor of the text's, and the authority figure therein, he is well on his way to win all the value he could want.

What the text has completely failed to explain is why this should be so. Why does maintaining a certain mental attitude produce an exponentially greater harvest of merit? This question is never addressed in the text and remains a submerged article of faith. Apparently it is so simply because the author, voicing his opinion via the mouthpiece of his textual Buddha-figure, said so. With this position, the author is disturbing the old and trusted mathematical logics of Buddhist merit collection by introducing, as the most crucial determinant in merit-making, a certain attitude that overrides the more mechanical model that it is based on.

That this renunciation of signs in the act of practicing moral deeds remains committed to standard Buddhist ethics is also notable in that it is only moral actions that are undermined and revamped in this manner by the text's rhetoric. Never does the text play with the possibility that deviant carnal deeds could, too, be practiced without abiding in signs and thereby produce a windfall of merit for the libertine. Thus the text is, in effect, rather prudish: it offers up no new practices or liberties and instead promotes an enthusiasm for cannibalizing the old system of practices so that the merit-engine of the old system will be fueled by the consumption of that very system in a self-referential, and, we can assume, self-aggrandizing, irony that nonetheless can only be won through submission to the text and its new definition of the Buddha.

There is another interesting problem in the promise of countless rewards for following the rather vague command to practice signless giving. Apparently, the value of keeping one's actions inconceivable is registered in the system of countable value (merit). Thus that infinite nebula of merit so speedily gained is never critiqued, or confronted with the denial of signs that produced it in the first place. Consequently, the dialectic of signlessness is employed very sparingly so that the equation of temporary-loss-for-incredible-and-indelible-gain is left unbothered. Clearly, though the self-negating attitude promoted here produces value as it feeds on its source-system, it

never turns to eat its own product.[26] Thus the production of desire in the reader seems to trump philosophic evenhandedness.

Also, it remains unexplained how one could verify that one was practicing this type of not-abiding-in-signs giving, or wishing to be a bodhisattva, without holding views of identity, of course. This is particularly troublesome because the text is tempting the reader, with the greatest of rewards at stake, to try to verify the lack of abiding in signs during his practice of giving, even when he is supposedly not registering any signs. What I am suggesting is that there is a command to know that you are not knowing, and thus the characteristic of not-abiding-in-signs probably should be considered as yet another sign, though the text never allows for such signage at the meta-level.[27]

Next, in a near–non sequitur, the Buddha says:[28]

> "Subhūti, what do you think? Can you see the Tathāgata by the marks of his body, or not?"
>
> "No, World Honored One. You cannot see the Tathāgata by the marks of his body. And, why? Because what are called the bodily marks of the Buddha, are, in fact, not the bodily marks."
>
> The Buddha said to Subhūti, "Whatsoever has marks, that is false *(xuwang)*. If you see all marks as lacking marks, then you see the Tathāgata."

This exchange, much like the initial one regarding bodhisattvahood, is about identity and how it is to be recognized. Here, presumably, the author is disturbing the notion that the Buddha can be recognized by the usual thirty-two major signs that are traditionally believed to have adorned his body. Again with a logic that is never articulated, the reader is simply told that the Buddha is not to be seen within the sphere of signs.[29] And, conversely, anyone can see the Buddha, once they see the signless in signs. No

26. Given the unnegated final merit, it is interesting to see the second half of the text mention that bodhisattvas are told that they won't receive merit so that they won't lust *(tanzhuo)* after it; T.8.752a.28. This line, like many lines in the second half, seems designed to counter the perceived effects, and excesses, of the first half of the text.

27. Allowing the negative to have some thingification isn't that outlandish since the text uses the standard four-part negation scheme at the beginning that includes the negation of a negation ("lacking the lack of signs," *fei wuxiang*). Turning to negate the negation seems to give the first negation some kind of status or reality.

28. T.8.749a.21.

29. It is interesting that the second half of the text offers something of a commonsensical commentary on this passage:

> "The Buddha said, 'Subhūti, if one could see the Tathāgata by the 32 marks then a Cakravartin [who also has the 32 marks] would be a buddha.'
>
> Subhūti said to the Buddha, 'World Honored One, according to what I understand of the meaning that the Buddha teaches, one should not see the Tathāgata by the 32 marks.' "

particular value is explicitly stated for following this procedure, though a vision of the Buddha—even in some "postsign" form—is presumably accorded great value, especially in view of the fact that this text was written some five hundred years after the Buddha's death, as is suggested in the passage that follows.

In this vision of the Buddha, the dialectic works by annulling the first sign system to offer a higher one that is true and at one with the Buddha's identity. In this thematic, there is also an interesting move from the particular to the universal. The annulment of the Buddha's signs produces a vision that the Buddha legitimizes as a kind of seeing that ought to be considered as seeing-the-Buddha, regardless of the actual object of observation. This makes every object and place potentially revelatory of the Buddha, a power of universality that the text will soon claim for itself, though in clearer, even legalistic terms. In sum, then, this passage works much like the other two because the valued item from the older system, here, seeing the Buddha, is brought up to this meta-level and offered as a reward for the very process of "looking awry" at the older system.[30]

After these very short topics, the text bends in another direction. Suddenly, Subhūti is asking about the reception of this text:[31]

> Subhūti said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, will there be any sentient beings who, when they hear phrases of teachings like these, give rise to true belief?"
>
> The Buddha said, "Subhūti, don't speak like this. Five hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana *(miehou),* in the five hundred year [period] that follows, there will be those who uphold the rules (vinaya) *(chijie),* cultivate merit *(xiufu)* and who are able to believe these sentences and paragraphs, taking them to be true. You should know that these people have planted the roots of goodness under not one buddha, not two buddhas, not three, or four, or [even] five buddhas, but they have already planted the roots of goodness under countless, thousands, and tens of thousands of buddhas. When they hear these sentences and paragraphs and give rise, if only for an instant *(yinian),* to pure belief *(jingxin),* then, Subhūti, the Tathāgatas all will know, and all will see these sentient beings achieve limitless quantities of merit such as this.
>
> Why?[32] These sentient beings, again, are without the mark of self, the mark of person, the mark of sentient being, or the mark of living being. They are

30. I have borrowed the phrase "looking awry" from the title of a short book by Slavoj Žižek. In thinking about the recycling of older rhetorics, it is key to remember that the Buddha is quoted as saying something nearly identical in the Pāli Canon, "What is there, Vakkali, in seeing this vile body? Whoso sees Dhamma sees me; whoso sees me sees Dhamma. Seeing Dhamma, Vakkali, he sees me; seeing me, he sees Dhamma." Saṃyutta Nikāya III, 120, translation in Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 103.

31. T.8.749a.26.

32. The following passages to the end of this section seem confused and undirected.

> without the mark of dharma and also lack the mark of non-dharma *(feifa)*. Why? These sentient beings, if their minds held marks *(xin qu xiang)*, then they would be grasping self, person, and living being. If they held the mark of dharma, then they would be grasping self, person, and living being.[33] If they held the mark of non-dharma, then they would be grasping self, person, living being. Therefore one shouldn't hold dharmas and shouldn't hold non-dharmas. It is for this reason the Tathāgata often said to you monks, 'Know that the dharma I teach to you is like the raft analogy'[34]—if even dharma must be abandoned, what need is there to mention non-dharma."

In the first of the above paragraphs—a blatantly self-promoting passage—the author has Subhūti register what are presumably the author's anxieties regarding the reception of his newly concocted version of the merit system. That is, after delineating a law that rests on no ground but its own rhetoric, the author moves, clearly in a manner sensitive to intersubjective realities, to protect his discourse from doubt by bringing this doubt onstage to be dispelled by the lawgiver that he controls.

After these doubts are forcefully dispelled by the Buddha—nowhere else in their exchange does he seek to silence Subhūti's questioning—he goes on to laud the beings that might accept this teaching. Besides casting them as particularly upright Buddhists according to very traditional models of rule keeping and merit collecting, the author holds out quite a large carrot. Those sentient beings who accept his fabricated sūtra will win, instantly, an incalculable quantity of merit, and all the buddhas will observe this and verify it. This infinity of merit is produced in part by the assumed value of the act of belief itself, but it is also a function of delayed payoff from past work: those who accept this writing as valid are enticed into thinking that this very act of belief proves that they in fact have an endlessly extensive portfolio of serving limitless buddhas in the past. Put differently, the text is saying, bank with us and we'll show you, via the most trustworthy of authorities, that you have in fact been banking with us from the beginning and now you can lay claim to that rich past. This form, it would seem, is quite parallel to the way regaining your sonship works in the *Lotus Sūtra:* you will be who you've always been once you accept the text's definition of your past and the rules for its reclamation.

Crucial for reading the text's basic program as the projection of the historical flesh-and-blood Buddha into textual space is its admitted interest in the Buddhist tradition five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. If we assume that the text was written roughly at the beginning of the common

33. Dharma and nondharma in these passages appear to refer to good and bad practices.

34. The raft analogy is in the Pāli Canon in the *Majjhima Nikāya* and is cited in Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books,* p. 35, "Using the figure of a raft, brethren, will I teach you the norm, as something to leave behind, not take with you."

era, and this is not doubted by current scholarship, then we likely are on solid ground in interpreting the author's reconstruction of the Buddha in the text as part of an attempt to revivify the tradition and recover a core to what likely was appearing as an increasingly diffuse and disparate movement, a problem that I address more directly in the final sections of chapter 6. In a telling passage that comes after the first round of negations, we have solid evidence that locates the writing moment of the text and reveals the text's strategy in offering conversion to itself as the technique for securing an authentic Buddhist identity and the ongoing attention of a set of cosmic, timeless, and yet carefully observant buddhas.

Thus it seems that the *Diamond Sūtra,* like the *Lotus Sūtra,* is attempting to seduce the reader by offering itself as an object of faith that, when correctly believed and worshiped, will fulfill all old-style Buddhist obligations even as it renders those obligations superfluous. Thus in converting to the text with even one "instant" of "pure belief," one joins a select group who, in this gesture, "rediscover" their authentic past under countless buddhas and similarly gain a secure future with the amassing of "limitless quantities of merit" verified by the buddhas. In short, the normal Buddhist tradition is fully supplanted once the reader engages the text in the way it asks to be treated.

In creating a textual Buddha who "speaks" in this manner, the author has depicted the flesh-and-bones Buddha preparing for his absence by explaining his ongoing presence in this text five hundred years after his death and promising that the worshipful reception of the discourse will be noted by a kind of timeless group of buddhas who apparently verify this contractual exchange. In brief, the *Diamond Sūtra,* like the *Lotus Sūtra,* has established itself as a perfect repository of presence located on an ahistorical plane that extends far beyond the Buddha's limited lifetime, and thus can outlive him and yet duplicate his presence and perform his magical powers provided it is treated just like a buddha. Presumably, this is that crucial moment when the author is counting on the reader's desire for the Buddha's presence to allow for the monumental shift of the Buddha into textual space. The reader, in accepting this claim, is giving authenticity to the text in return for certainty in the present authenticity of the Buddha—that fundamentally desperate exchange that seems so important to all the texts treated in this book.

Skipping the next passage, which spins rather awkwardly around the idea that the above promise is valid simply because things lack signs, we come to the section, which is arguably the riskiest. Here there is a mild epistemological critique of the Buddha and his teachings, which quickly returns to discussing the quest for merit in the previously established involuting form and then concludes with a wild promise of the value of transmitting this text with its jumped-up version of merit-production. Notable in this passage is

the more visible shift to having Subhūti play an active role in giving the teaching. In the above passage about the Tathāgata's signlessness, Subhūti offered one line of information, but here, if the slightly vague assignation of speakers is to be trusted, he gives a much longer segment of teaching, proving, we can assume, that the author is cleverly showing Subhūti's gradual induction into the fold of understanding bodhisattvas:[35]

> "Subhūti, what do you think, has the Tathāgata achieved unsurpassed bodhi, or not? Has the Tathāgata a teaching (dharma) to give, or not?"
>
> Subhūti replied, "According to my understanding of the meaning *(yi)* of what the Buddha taught, there is *no definite (wu you dingfa)* thing (dharma) called 'unsurpassed bodhi.' There is also *no definite* teaching (dharma) that the Tathāgata gives. And, why? The teachings that the Tathāgata give are unobtainable *(bu kequ)* and ineffable *(bu keshuo)*. They are neither dharmas, nor non-dharmas. Why? All worthy sages are distinguished by taking lack *(wu)* as their teaching (dharma)."
>
> "Subhūti, what do you think, if a person filled three thousand great world systems with the seven jewels and offered them, would their merits be quite numerous *(duo)*, or not?"
>
> Subhūti replied, "Quite numerous, World Honored One."
>
> "And, why? This merit is, in fact, of the nature of non-merit. Therefore, the Tathāgata calls it numerous. If, again, a person received even as little as one stanza of four lines of this sūtra and taught it to another person, their merit would be greater than this [offering of jewels]. Why? Subhūti, all the buddhas and all the teachings (dharmas) of unsurpassed bodhi come from this sūtra. Subhūti, what is called 'buddhadharma' is in fact not buddhadharma."

This passage leaves little doubt about how convoluted the text is and how various concerns pop up seemingly apropos of nothing and are often left unresolved.

To begin with the framing of this passage, the Buddha and his teaching are clearly objectified and critiqued, yet in a manner that does not disturb the speaking Buddha or the text that holds all this "talk" together. The supposed lack or indeterminate quality of buddhadharma on the content level in no way unhinges the performative aspect of discussing buddhadharma from a buddha's point of view. The relentless didactic tone of the text makes it clear that the speaking Buddha has *very* definite teachings about the indefinite teachings of the "other" buddha-as-object-to-be-defined who is now, temporarily, under analysis. Thus, again, by paying attention to how the narrative works through a bifurcation of the Buddha-subject into subject and object components, we see how performed negation—aimed at the object component of being a buddha—simply functions to confirm and secure the speaking subject-component of being a buddha.

35. T.8.749b.12.

Paying attention to the role of negation in these passages shows other things as well. The opening line questions the Buddha's achievement of the very thing that authorizes him to speak truth. Subhūti dodges this question and only responds to the second half of the question regarding the Buddha's teaching. Here, too, he softens the question with an answer that uses, for the first time in the series of negations, the qualifier "definite," making the annulment of the Buddha's teaching somewhat less radical. In the next line, this lack of definiteness is explained as a transcendental lack and not a mundane or threatening epistemological lack. Similarly, this lack of definiteness is associated with states desirable, yet out of reach, such as ineffability and unobtainableness. Thus it would seem that the lack of definiteness in the Buddha's teaching is merely the mark of a sublimity that is not found elsewhere and therefore does not resound with the same kind of absolute lack that the other entities were made to suffer.

Then comes the most curious comment that I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, "All worthy sages are distinguished by taking lack *(wu)* as their teaching (dharma)." Rephrased this might be put as, "Sages are defined by teaching nondefinition." As is probably already abundantly clear, "lack" or "nondefinition" here is tightly determined in several ways. First, it seems that there is the clear category of the sage *(sheng),* which can be pointed to as one distinguishable from the other categories of beings. Second, the "teaching of lack" that is constitutive of this being in no way impedes normal Buddhist logics of morality, merit collection, and upward mobility in a spiritual hierarchy, as all three have already been sanctioned in the preceding conversations. Third, and this is easily overlooked, "lack" and "teaching lack" are very different things. "Teaching lack" can be as constitutive as any other teaching, since even negative statements exist as presence when they are spoken or written. And, obviously, the statement, "All worthy sages are distinguished by taking lack *(wu)* as their teaching (dharma)," is definitional itself and thus essentially positive. That is, this is one of those "this sentence is false" propositions that only avoids its internal contradiction by remaining transparent: the reader's imagination presumably goes to the negation ("no teachings") and not the defining structure that encases it ("that the Tathāgata gives"). Ironically, then, the lack at the core somehow justifies the perimeter that surrounds it—a key point, I think, in evaluating a number of related topics, including Buddhist identity itself.

Furthermore, while many things may have lack, value is only effected in this text by the teaching of this lack, and thus a teaching whose content is about lack is again in no way jeopardized. In effect, all this line says is that the one who occupies the highest point in the hierarchy, the virtuous sage, is granted the privilege to legislate the reality of any definition, based in part on his knowing that no definition is real until he sanctions it. This supposed knowledge, however, does not disturb the moral hierarchy of the text and its

interest in generating desire for advancement in that hierarchy. On the contrary, setting up a discussion of sages tempts the reader with a shortcut, yet all the while making the top more unassailable, since the sage is defined by the oxymoronic-sounding having-a-teaching-of-lack and resides in that apparently unthinkable state where is and is not come and go according to a new law that is as yet poorly understood by the reader.

In the above passage, concern with moral math is exactly what follows this claim to be in charge of radical indeterminacy. In what looks like a garbled passage in which the speaker is not clearly identifiable, and in which the pattern of the dialectic is disturbed, the merit of giving nearly boundless quantities of jewels is said to have merit simply because it has the nature of nonmerit. This passage seems unusual in the text as it is one of the few places where passing through this negation does not seem to increase its value. The typical inflation of merit comes in the following line, when the Buddha explains that this stacking up of votive jewels, though sounding infinitely productive of merit, is no match for accepting so little as a quatrain of this text and passing it on. I believe that this particular dialectic that first stacks up and offers endless jewels is essentially inert since its job here is to secure the value of the old value of giving donations. The Buddha, in essence, is made to negate its value and bring it back, but because nothing has been done to the reader, no gain is promised. Instead, this sets up a kind of default value that can be used to entice the reader into the maneuvers that follow.

The next maneuver, in fact, is about submitting to the text. In a fascinating refrain the text claims its own limitless value by saying that circulating the text itself is the most meritorious of deeds. Without any regard for the details of transmission, such as who is doing the transmission, to whom, how, and in what ritual setting—a set of very pointed concerns in more traditional Buddhist discussions of giving teachings—the *Diamond Sūtra* casts itself as a pump of limitless merit, available to anyone who traffics in it. This promise opens up several interesting lines of interpretation.

First, there seems to be a disregard for which part of the sūtra is of value. Is the sūtra defined by a pervading sameness such that its value can be extracted through the circulation of any of its parts? The answer would seem to be yes, and this immediately suggests that the text is speaking of itself as sublime object whose value and being is not determined in the realm of time, space, causality, and so on. Perhaps it is only hyperbole, but nonetheless it is clear that the text is taking itself as a sacred perimeter that, even in small portions, can work inconceivable good, regardless of the actual content transmitted.

Then, if we read this part-for-the-whole value claim as implicitly relic-like in structure, perhaps we should connect it to the later passage claiming that wherever the sūtra is, that place should be worshiped by the hierarchy

of living beings, from gods on down, as though it were a buddha's stūpa *(fo tamiao),* implying that it itself is imbued with the sanctity traditionally accorded the Buddha's relics.[36] Even without a connection between these two claims, it is clear that in either of the text's estimation of itself, meaning and language are trying to turn themselves into things beyond language. Furthermore, these gestures of comparison make explicit the problem that value is always relational and that establishing the value of the text requires reference to value systems beyond the text, a problem I return to below.

In the next section, in a tedious manner, the Buddha goes through the standard list of spiritual levels that traditional practitioners might hope to achieve—stream-enterer, once-returner, final-lifer, and arhat—to argue that no one should claim to have achieved these ranks. At the end of this list, Subhūti then recounts how he understands his spiritual status, but he makes this claim via negativity with an explicit submission to the Buddha's power to determine being and status. No surprise, then, that the reality of his status is reaffirmed by the Buddha once this self-vacating gesture is performed.

Right after this undermining of traditional spiritual hierarchies, the author has the Buddha discuss the transmission that he received from the prior Buddha, Dīpaṃkara. This transmission, it turns out, is defined as the transmission of the teaching that there is no teaching, and yet, as I argued above, this negativity does not interfere with business as usual. Transmission and the spiritual lineage that hooks the speaking Buddha to his authorizing predecessor remain secure, only now the negative rhetoric that was turned on the traditional categories of Buddhist sainthood is effectively redeployed such that the very thing that produced lack in the Other's claim to identity and status is claimed to produce substance and continuity in the speaking Buddha. Thus the undermining of the Other becomes the very foundation of the authority of this Buddha and the author who is his puppeteer.

Three things are notable here. First, the lack in this negation of content in the transmission is not jumped up to be anything more than it is. Subhūti simply says that when the Buddha was with Dīpaṃkara, he *actually* received no teaching (dharma). This dialectic, like the simple negation of the merit of giving in the preceding passage, simply ends up returning the reader to the same place where he started, with no added value advertised because the Buddha is still who he was before the dialectic was actualized. Of course, the polemical value is high; now the explanation of transmission is inoculated against the charge of being particular and therefore limited. With lack as that which buddhas teach, it is doubly appropriate that it should also be what constitutes them as beings: they are what they teach.

36. T.8.750a.6.

Second, this negation is quite safe because it is not at all like the negation that the Buddha never met Dīpaṃkara—a negation that would really undermine the Buddha's identity and authority. Thus, whereas content may be hollowed out in the transmission of truth, the form of the lineage remains unaffected. Moreover, in line with the structure of identity-formation in any patriarchal situation, the very vacating of content from form in the creation of a son-successor is that sole prerogative of those figures who inhabit the lineage-form. In essence this implies that the function of the negative dialectic is the basis of buddhahood since buddhas are those who know that on a higher level there actually are no buddhas, but just this movement to the higher level is exactly what reconstitutes buddhas and their lineage of identity and authenticity.

Third, and true for many of these dialectical passages, the text is creating a figure who seems to be able to break the most basic laws of logic and being. Here, the ordinary reader expects that the Buddha should have received something particular from Dīpaṃkara that was to make him into the new buddha—identity shouldn't come from nothing, but this is, on one level, what the passage is suggesting. Displaying a buddha-figure who can receive nothing and still come into his own being further creates the image of a transcendent figure endowed with power far beyond our own. This power to confuse and transgress categories is not simply the power to make meaning as one wishes; it is also the power to make power out of the confusion of categories. Thus this buddha-figure negates life, being, identity, power, status, and so on, but in that very act ends up with more of just those items.

Following this recitation of spiritual authority, there is a short discussion of buddha lands:[37]

> "What do you think Subhūti, do bodhisattvas adorn buddha lands?"
> "No, World Honored One."
> "Why, adorning buddha lands is actually not-adorning-buddha lands, and thus is called, 'adorning buddha lands.' Therefore, Subhūti, bodhisattvas, mahāsattvas, must produce pure minds *(qing jingxin)* in the following way: they should produce a mind that does not abide in form/sex *(bu ying zhu se sheng xin).* They should produce a mind that does not abide in sound, smell, taste or contact. They should be without abiding as they produce this mind."

This critique of the buddha lands has two agendas. The first is simply to pass buddha lands through a negation; nothing is gained in terms of merit or value but presumably, like the negation and restoration of the theory of transmission that precedes it, these "realities" now have been inoculated and their practitioners reminded that the Buddha can revoke the permit for

37. T.8.749c.18.

any kind of spiritual practice or identity claim. The second agenda seeks to internalize the purification of the buddha lands and to locate them solely in the mind of the bodhisattva. It is notable that the intent here is to purify the mind by avoiding contact with objects of any sense field. Oddly, the value of purity never comes in for critique. Whereas merit, transmission, teachings, and so on, all have been critiqued in various ways, this purity of the mind is left untouched. The author could have reasonably gone on to at least pass purity through the "not-purity therefore purity" dialectic, or even the more dangerous "real purity is seeing purity in the impure," a negation style already applied to the Buddha's adorning marks. None of this happened, and thus I conclude that the author wanted purity left pure.

Leaving this brief discussion of buddha lands, the text offers three examples of extreme size and quantity in order to prepare for the statement of the value of accepting and transmitting even four lines of this sūtra:[38]

> "Subhūti, for instance, if a person's body was like that of Mount Sumeru, king of mountains, what do you think, would his body be big or not?" Subhūti said, "Quite big, World Honored One. And, why? Because the Buddha has said that not-body is the name of great-body."
>
> "Subhūti, it is like sands in the Ganges river each becoming a river, and then the sands of these rivers would be really numerous, wouldn't they?" "Extremely numerous, World Honored One. The rivers would be numerous beyond counting, not to mention their sands."
>
> "Subhūti, I now will truthfully tell you: if a good son or good daughter collected the seven [types of] jewels as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, so that they filled three thousand great world systems, and then offered them, would their merits be numerous or not?" Subhūti said, "Extremely numerous, World Honored One."
>
> The Buddha said to Subhūti, "If a good son or a good daughter accepted and held as few as four lines of this sūtra and then explained them to another, then their merit would be greater than that merit [of giving]."

The intent of the first example of the great size of a person's body comparable to Mount Sumeru eludes me. I consider it among the inert dialectics because no new size, quantity, or perceivable quality is produced in the negation. The next example, however, is quite telling. With a beautiful example of involution, the author has the Buddha make Subhūti think about the sands of the Ganges, a standard trope for uncountable quantities in Buddhist rhetoric, and then turns each of those grains of sand into a site for an exponential multiplication. The sands in the river are to be imagined as rivers themselves, which again contain more sands. Thus in the analogy there is a visual "jumping up" of levels whereby one level is transposed on top of another to produce the image of infinity—an infinity that is an effect

38. T.8.749c.23.

simply of that doubling, but also, probably, of the mixing of categories. In this example, one looks, in a William Blake manner, at a single particle of sand and suspects that it contains everything else. In particular, receptacle and content are overlapped so that the content is imagined to be the receptacle at another level.

This revealing analogy moves into a statement of the value of this discourse-on-value mentioned above:[39]

> "Furthermore, Subhūti, wheresoever someone explains even as few as four lines of this sūtra etc., you should know that that place is one that all the heavenly beings and demi-gods should venerate *(ying gongyang)* as if it were a buddha's stūpa *(ru fo tamiao)*.[40] [Given this fact,] what need is there to mention that if there is a person who is able to receive and uphold [this sūtra], reading and reciting it? For, Subhūti, you should know that this person achieves the most exalted, the most rare of dharmas, and the place where this text *(jingdian)* exists is to be considered to have a buddha or one of his respected disciples."
>
> At this time Subhūti asked the Buddha, "World Honored One, by what name should we call this sūtra and how should I and the rest [of the monks] accept and uphold it?"
>
> The Buddha said to Subhūti, "This sūtra is to be called the Diamond[-like] Prajñāpāramitā. And you and the others should use this name in receiving and upholding it."

This passage essentially equates the text with the Buddha, even as it had earlier claimed that the text predated all buddhas. This folding of the parental text back into its progeny is curious and again reveals the new law's dependence on the old established sanctity of the Buddha's physical person, a point made abundantly clear with the reference to a "buddha's stūpa," a site that we can assume would have been believed to house the Buddha's relics.

Then the discourse is given a name and place in the lives of the Buddha's followers. The name serves as a distinguishing perimeter, and the rules of its acceptance dictate its survival and replication within the community of believers. In short, a discourse on lack and absence has concluded by offering itself as presence and surplus, positing itself as a grand engine of value production that can be activated when it is maintained and reproduced.

It would be instructive to continue this line-by-line reading of the sūtra through the following section, which appears like an odd doubling of the

39. T.8.750a.6.

40. I have chosen to follow the Chinese literally here—"as if it were a Buddha's stūpa"—though I find Schopen convincing when he argues that the Sanskrit behind this phrase likely means something more like: "as if it were a real/true/proper shrine" based on the way the compound *caityabhūto* ought to be read. For discussion of this problem, see his "The Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*' in the *Vajracchedikā:* Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahayana," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): esp. pp. 176 ff.

text, but I will stop here and draw together points from my analysis that will be useful for other readings.

THE META-LEVEL OF THE MASTER SIGNIFIER

To think through more fully what seems to be effective in this rhetoric, it is worth noting that in creating and "packaging" a transcendental view of the older transcendental system, the text tempts the reader to adopt or at least acknowledge the position of what can be called a new "master signifier"—a position that arrogates to itself the power to grant or deny meaning and value in the old system, just as it pleases. By moving through the dialectic of negation, the reader participates in a revaluation of Buddhism in which time-honored values are given and taken away in a kind of "fort-da" manner, producing the dizzying effect of suddenly moving up to a level that seems to be in charge of defining the system that used to define one's place in the world.[41]

Stepping up to this level moves the reader from being subject to Buddhism and its laws to subjecting Buddhism and its laws to a new law, as given by the text. In short, the prior subjective stance of "suffering the law" is involuted so that the law suffers the judgment of the subject, albeit through the aegis of the Buddha and the text that he claims precedes and produces him.[42] Naturally this inversion of contained and container could excite the reader since the boundaries of his identity and worth, seen hitherto only from confinement within the old system, are now viewed from the outside, a new position whose limitations are not yet clearly delimited, though it is advertised as limitless in value. Furthermore, one could see this movement beyond the system as a convoluted act of renouncing a system of renunciation, with old-style Buddhism being cast as a confining domestic zone that one can and must be liberated from, even as this intention to renounce is exactly what was learned in that prior zone.[43]

While quite exciting in the way that it steps outside of the bounds of the first system, this leap up from the old system to a position of overview in fact does not go very far afield. The text is notable for not lingering in the anomic gap of negation where chaos or altogether unexpected meanings and desires might emerge. Instead, it always immediately returns the reader

41. For Freud's famous discussion of "fort-da," see his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* reprinted in Peter Gay, ed., *Freud Reader* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 599–601.

42. Overcoming the law in favor of a higher law is obviously also the basis of much New Testament writing. For example, see Paul's Romans or the Gospel of Mark.

43. Certainly this reading isn't at odds with the way the text replays the pre-Mahāyāna trope in which the Buddha is said to have taught that the Buddha's teachings are like a raft to be discarded after they are used.

to the work of advancement through discipline, largely within the confines of the older system. Radical doubts about the reliability of the Buddha as a narrator of truth, or about the world as an ordered and karmically determined place, or about the power of merit to shape one's future—doubts that would presumably put an end to Buddhism and the genre of sūtra writing—are never broached, and the whole structure of the text suggests order and decorum within strictly maintained hierarchical relations. Hence the sublating dialectic is boundless in its excitement but severely limited in its application.

To miss the conservative nature of the text's negative dialectics would be like thinking that people who plant wildflowers in their gardens are against domesticity, since, after all, wildflowers are in the category of nature as opposed to houses and sidewalks. The naïveté of this position follows from ignoring the stability of the boundaries that make "nature" in your yard essentially a deracinated and dominated item completely contrary to its valences of wildness and pristine simplicity. Obviously, it is just this addition of domesticity's opposite that makes domesticity so much more attractive. Similarly, for this text to work, negation has to look wild even as it is put to work creating a new domesticated space that can advertise its higher qualities by incorporating elements that on one level suggest its demise.

ONE SYSTEM, TWO SETS OF LAWS

In this rhetorical strategy, this new Buddhist gesture of negation directed toward Buddhism is, as a second-order action, both the same as and different from the first order. It mimics the first order by following all its cosmological laws (value through renunciation, merit through submission to Buddhist law and its omniscient advocate, the value of merit itself, the cosmological categories of Buddhist saints, stūpas as holy sites, etc.) and yet turns to feed itself by consuming these laws, even though these consumed laws *still* govern the purported value of consuming these laws in this manner. Generalizing for emphasis, the discourse of the *Diamond Sūtra* follows the *form* of the law even as it takes the *articulation* of the law to task. New forms of the law are produced when the active aspect of the law (the renunciation of content, being, domesticity, pride, etc.) is applied to the law as object or inert figure. In effect, this self-regeneration through self-negation is completely parallel to what the *Lotus Sūtra* accomplished with refathering Buddhist sons.[44]

44. To offer an analogy for this rhetorical gesture of imagined separation and self-viewing, if we imagine the traditional meaning system of Buddhism as a body, it is as though the perspective of the *Diamond Sūtra* is the result of this body growing a tumorlike visual organ that protrudes enough so that it can serve as a vantage point to view its host body from which it

In the *Diamond Sūtra* this work of inviting the reader to reidentify himself or herself according to the text's rules is presented as a means to a hysterical kind of self-aggrandizement since the reader is offered the chance to hold the old system in his or her hand, even as he or she, presumably, maintains traditional Buddhist conduct and lives within the standard set of desires and fears excited and enforced by the old cosmological laws. As a reward for assent to passing sanctified objects through this magical and dark space of negativity, the reader is offered the promise of getting incredibly rich and powerful in an effortless fashion—as though in participating in this tantalizing project, the reader suddenly stumbled upon a hitherto unknown shortcut to the top that is won precisely in participating in the temporary annulment of the system of value that one still hopes to succeed in.[45] This thrill, because it wants to supersede the system that it still registers value within, is set up in a hysterical fashion: a new currency for a new system is never made, but one continually tries, by dismissing the old system, to mint new bills that only have value in the old currency system.

DESIRE AND THE SEDUCTIVE VIOLENCE OF DOUBLED LAWS

In trying to understand these techniques of promulgating desire for new laws about the old laws, I am interested in the way each of the two legalistic levels can be connected to a father-figure who gives not just the law, but identity, value, and comfort.[46] As the narrative doubles authority-sites, it would seem that there is a blending of deviance and submission that is quite interesting to theorize. In short, the reader watches the new father created

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mistakenly thinks it has separated. Of course, whether this view is beyond that body is quite dubious since so many structures and patterns informing the meta-view match those in the old system. What has changed, though, is that in climbing above and beyond the horizon of the prior symbolic system, the reader is urged simultaneously to traverse the expected legal boundaries of the prior system and to accept a higher form of paternal leadership that make this transgression appear legitimate. Thus as it is often found in ideological struggles, transgression and authority go hand in hand.

45. The question of seducing the reader with a kind of scandalously easy and direct way to previously denied rewards is even more interesting when we remember that the text is surely forged by someone who sets for himself the stipulation that he can only be writing "truth" insofar as his reader believes his discourse to be the discourse of the Buddha. Thus a discourse on the laws about the old laws overcomes its illegality (its lèse-majesté) by making belief in its legality—reception of the text as authentic—one of the most hallowed acts that a Buddhist could hope to achieve. Thus what the text calls accepting the text with "pure faith" *(qingxin)* is at the heart of winning one's "true" identity and an infinitude of wealth. The ease of winning this mountain of merit, I think, speaks to the desperation that the author felt in hoping to convince the reader that his project was authentic.

46. I consider this construction in the text a family complication because the text, though lacking the heavy-handed father-son rhetorics that other Mahāyāna works evince, still treats the

by the author, who I will call Father2, take up the traditional teachings about the Buddha and Buddhist truth and annul them. Thus what basically happens is that this newly created Father2 executes Father1, or more exactly, the reader's notion of Father1, and this very act of execution is performed as the fulfillment of what the text has defined as the essence of what truth-fathers ought to do. Thus this new gesture of negation fits the template of truth-fathers that the text wants to present as timelessly true, and not simply constructed within its own polemical framework. And, obviously, in this collision of authority structures, the reader is not left uninvolved. Like Subhūti, the reader has to watch and assent to Father2's execution of Father1 and then side with Father2 who, though performing in this new role, is still implicitly confused with Father1. So just as the *Lotus Sūtra* made conversion to a new form of sonship appear as the regathering of a previously established identity, so, too, does the re-creation of a truth-father through the "death" of an earlier prototype appear to be nothing but a recovery of what was always true.

In making the reader party to this disturbing progression, the text invites him or her into a new subject-position by showing a bifurcation of authority into subject and object (new and old) and then having the new, higher authority dismiss the old, lower authority, as the reader identifies with the active, winning half of this convoluted act. Of course, there is a certain "slide factor" here because the reader only sides with Father2 by assuming that he is, in fact, the same as Father1. Clearly, the authority of the first buddha is subsumed by the second, who then returns to work on the first buddha. In essence, then, one's prior submission to Buddhist authority becomes the basis for its own overcoming, but this movement away from Father1 is only possible via another submission to the new Father2. In all this, the text excites the reader with the idea that fathers and their legal system can fall, even if they can only be rightfully "killed off" by new fathers.

CONCLUSION

Standing back from this reading to ask again, What is this text about? I think we have to say that the text is first and foremost about alternative tracks of value. More precisely, it is clear that in the text's effort to restructure value, rhetoric focused on the potent dyad of negation and the figure of authority

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reader as child who needs to be instructed in Buddhist law and needs to be brought within the new fold of bodhisattvas, who are defined as the special recipients of the Buddha's care.

It is worth noting how important similar issues are in the Gospels, which also function as the new law about the old law. Jesus as the Rabbi against the Rabbis, and the even more complicated inversion of making God into a Jewish priest who *offers* a paschal lamb-son on that Passover, instead of *receiving* offerings as tradition would demand.

who wields that negative rhetoric. In manifold ways, this text shows that negation is to be applied first to produce authority in the narrative-image of the Buddha and second to produce desire in the eyes of the Buddhist "observers" of the narrative, observers who are located inside the text as the figure Subhūti and outside the text in the figure of the reader whose presence is so keenly expected. Key here is that although the form and content of tradition may be set against one another—renunciation as content *applied* to Buddhist perimeters and identities as form—the desires of the Buddhist audiences are stationary since they are assumed to want what they have always wanted—merit, status, purity, the presence of the Buddha, and so on—and yet they can now only get these items via negativity and its textual vehicle.

Entering into the circuit of value-via-negativity means that the reader, through these repetitious passages, has to become adept at passing his identity and value-assumptions through the perspective of this new version of the Buddha, who reaffirms his right to legislate value and identity and yet also demands a new form of faith for this new textual medium. Above all else, the reader learns that he must have faith in the Buddha's presence in the *Diamond Sūtra,* where he preaches the incompleteness of the prior teachings, which can only be overcome by taking this teaching of incompleteness as complete. Once one has become convinced, in "pure faith," of the completeness of this discussion of prior incompleteness, one can move from the category of monk into the new in-group of bodhisattvas who are to take this doubling and negation as the basis of their identity and practice. Thus, just as the *Lotus Sūtra* manipulated "real" Buddhist sonship, here everything is doubled and can only be itself when it disparages its mirror image precedent.

Second, despite the rhetoric that removes ostensible content, this rhetoric of negation remains as a thing-in-itself that can perform various functions. Most notably, it fills out the perimeter of the text, and even the perimeter of the Buddha himself, as seen clearly in the final stanza of the first part of the text that equates the text with the relic form of the Buddha's body. Clearly, the negation of content can be content just as well as anything else, but it has the added advantage of producing an authority figure whose sublimity is partly generated in the very act of ruling over the negation process. Having proved his prowess in these unnerving gestures, this "master of negation" seems altogether prepared to define the value of worshiping the "master" himself and his performance of the dialectical processes.

Third, the text implies a certain metastasis of negative rhetoric. As we have seen, the text produces value from canceling out what it sees as traditional value and then incites the reader to collect a new, limitlessly large packet of value by first believing the value of this process and then subjectifying others to it. In other words, the text is derivative in two primary ways:

it obviously feeds on established systems of authority and value; and it promises to deliver fantastically greater value to the reader in a postponed manner that only comes due with a transfer of the text and its rhetoric to the Other. This second type of derivative value is particularly interesting because it shows that what is getting passed around is the command to pass around the command.[47] Thus the medium becomes the message as the text is obsessed with metastasizing itself such that its interior becomes bloated with the call to exteriorize itself.

The thrills that this text might generate are in no way diminished by this lack of content. Quite the contrary: the text not only moves the reader on to a heady, meta-level for critiquing traditional values, it also encourages the reader to move up from being subject to this version of the Law to being its master, by transmitting the text to an Other. Perhaps even this very gesture of doing to the Other what was just done to oneself pushes one close to the form of the higher buddha that is furnished in the text, since as one promulgates the text, one plays at being a buddha in charge of dictating, to the Other, higher forms of value and identity.

Given the construction and function of this textual-buddha, I think that we should return to the possibility that this grinding of Buddhism through a Buddhist dialectical gristmill was only possible when a new gristmill was established—the written text. With text serving as a secure surrogate buddha-body, linguistic grindings could be performed at will, as long as all other Buddhist values were lodged in the physicality of the text that conducted these devastating reviews. Hence the text became both the parental matrix for authority and the relic container that made this sublime presence available for cultic attention. With these certainties in place, the text allowed for traditional Buddhism to be ground up and then reconstructed in a solid and enduring manner that maintained Buddhist authority within the sublime and timeless object of the text. Given this radical overcoming of Buddhist forms of authority and identity, it is no wonder that the sites of birth and death of the buddhas were said to be found in the text itself.

It would be interesting and instructive to read through other related Mahāyāna texts, particularly works located in the family of Perfection of Wisdom texts—such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*—to see how they perform parallel gestures of executing tradition only to regroup it around themselves and the reading moment. Of course, styles and emphases vary in these texts, but applying versions of the above analyses will

47. If we read the text as adlike, and thus consciously intersubjective, then the value circuit in the text resolves by making the Other into a version of oneself through making the Other find another Other to replicate the process. As I argued in chapter 1, this formula matches the basic structure of patriarchy since sons only really become sons by fathering sons in the image of their own father.

likely render useful insights and reveal a range of shared thematics in Mahāyāna literature that we have not yet appreciated. In fact, in chapter 6, I return to these themes to show that in a slightly later text, the *Vimalakīrti,* the basic building blocks of the analysis that I have constructed here—set around the questions of desire, seduction, negation, and patriarchy-in-textuality—again work quite well.

5

Sameness with a Difference in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*

Against the repetitious negations that made up most of the *Diamond Sūtra,* this chapter takes up the issue of the internal buddha, that statuesque figure of perfect paternity that several Mahāyāna sūtras posited as the only legitimate subject inside the body of each sentient being. Though insisting on a perfect and permanent truth-father within the ordinary subject would turn out to be awkward for a number of reasons, it also appears to have been a rather attractive innovation in several spheres of early Mahāyāna writing.[1] Then, once Buddhism went to East Asia, this topic became paramount for a broad range of Chinese and Japanese writers, with Chan writers appearing particularly interested in developing this notion along several tracks.

To focus on the literary presentation of the internal buddha, I give a close reading of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* which is dedicated to explaining the "visible" reality of the internal buddha and the techniques for excavating it. In line with the reading styles of the preceding chapters, I first account for the narrative techniques by which the text constructs this internal truth-father for the reader and then explore the means by which the text offers itself as the avenue for gaining access to this form of paternal perfection. Without too much work it will become clear that this sūtra shares many agendas and techniques with the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra.*

1. Besides the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* considered here, other Indian sources for notions of the internal buddha include the *Laṇkāvatāra Sūtra,* the Mahāyāna version of the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra,* the *Śrīmālā Sūtra (Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanāda Sūtra),* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga.* I have chosen the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* for its brevity and for its interesting construction of "direct seeing" as produced from the rather complex manipulation of the reader's gaze.

I would like to thank Michael Zimmerman for offering me useful points of criticism as I edited this chapter in fall 2001.

OVERVIEW

The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is a relatively short text, roughly the length of the *Diamond Sūtra.* Though no manuscripts of it survive in Indic languages, there are two versions translated into Chinese; the older version was supposedly translated by Buddhabhadra in the fifth century, and the other, which probably appeared in the early ninth century, is attributed to Amoghavajra.[2] The later text looks much like its predecessor, though certain passages have been expanded and others deleted, and in places there is a new, more specific vocabulary that gains clarity by using binomes where the Buddhabhadra version more often employed single characters. Since I am ultimately interested in how these texts might have shaped early Chan rhetoric in the eighth century, I have chosen to work from the earlier translation done by Buddhabhadra.[3]

For the purpose of discussion and analysis, I treat Buddhabhadra's version of the narrative in seven thematic sections:

1. The text opens with a standard Mahāyāna introduction with monks and bodhisattvas in attendance at the teaching site in Rājagṛha.
2. Then there is a brief "historical" narrative in which, on this occasion ten years after his enlightenment, the Buddha magically displays numberless, glowing lotus flowers in the sky. The Buddha then causes the petals of the lotus to open, wilt, and rot, thereby revealing a glowing buddha at each of their cores. Not surprisingly, these glowing buddhas suspended in the sky, along with the sudden death of the magical flowers, produced wonder and doubt in the gathered audience. This doubt, as in the case of the *Lotus Sūtra,* propels the narrative forward and represents another example of a Mahāyāna author exploring that interesting zone between the "history" of the teaching event and the teaching itself.
3. Right after the miracle, and with the glowing buddhas still suspended in the air, the narrative introduces the Bodhisattva Vajramati *(Jin ganghui)* who, for reasons that are not explained until the conclusion, is selected from the audience and made to serve as the Buddha's interlocutor. Like

2. See T.16.457a for Buddhabadhra's translation and T.16.460b for Amoghavajra's. William H. Grosnick provides an excellent translation of Buddhabhadra's text: "The Tathāgatagarbha Sutra," in *Buddhism in Practice,* ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 92–106. However, for the sake of consistency, I have chosen to retranslate the passages that I focus on, and though I differ with Grosnick's readings in several places, I do not mean to cast doubt on his impressive translation.

3. For readers interested in the text's history, in Chinese and Tibetan recensions, I recommend Michael Zimmerman's recent study, *A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra: The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teaching in India* (Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, 2002).

Maitreya in the *Lotus Sūtra,* Vajramati's first task is to take the narrative of the "historical" event, which had been recounted by an omniscient and invisible narrator, and make it his own. To this end, he laboriously restates what has happened and then rephrases it yet again in verse form.

4. In response to Vajramati's questions, the Buddha gives a brief explanation of what this miracle means, and it is here that the text folds back on itself, for the Buddha explains that this miracle is to be understood as the introduction to the teaching of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra.* As in the *Lotus Sūtra,* this is the point where the narrative takes itself as an object and proclaims that part of itself is actually external to itself and, by effecting this illusory separation, generates a supposedly reliable reference point for explaining the legitimacy of the rest of itself.[4]
5. Having explained the miracle to Vajramati, the Buddha lists eight metaphors for imagining the reality of an internal buddha inside the body of each sentient being.
6. After these rather extended metaphors, which constitute the longest single section in the text, there is an explanation of the efficacy won from accepting the text and duplicating it for others.
7. The Sūtra closes with a short narrative explaining the past efficacy of the text when it turned two billion bodhisattvas into buddhas the previous time it was taught, an explanation that ties back to this current teaching as it is revealed that Vajramati was among those two billion bodhisattvas but somehow, like Maitreya in the *Lotus Sūtra,* missed out on being turned into a buddha.

Even with this brief outline it would seem that the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is quite at home in the family of texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* both of which used similar strategies of self-reflexive promotion in order to seal the authority of their narratives and to build pressure on the reader to accept them as true in a gesture that promises to refigure the reader's relation to Buddhist truth and authenticity. Despite these parallels, on first glance one might think that there is a striking absence of negation in this text, if by negation we mean something akin to the *Diamond Sūtra*'s rhetoric that refutes items only to recover them in some sublated form, or the *Lotus Sūtra*'s insistence on annihilating prior forms of Buddhist truth and identity in order to establish new ones.

Though the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* lacks these two types of negation, another more mechanical form of negation figures prominently in the pro-

4. Like many twentieth-century books, the text carries its own preface as an integral and essential part of itself. Probably one of the most famous, and entertaining, prefaces that is obviously part of the novel is found at the front of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita,* which opens with the psychiatrist explaining the circumstances under which the "narrative" was written and why it was published in novel form.

ject of recovering one's internal buddha. In the Buddha's promises to Vajramati, and the reader, we learn that the unwanted, adventitious, and polluted part of the subject can be dismissed, leaving a pure and always-already present buddha as the only legitimate subject. Thus, essentially, the text's rhetoric promises to the reader that he or she can undergo something like a smelting process that will extract the internal buddha from its polluting surroundings. As I argue below, just this promise of paring the subject down to its innate pure essence warrants being treated as a form of negation not simply for its promised effect but also for its dialectical forms that, structurally, parallel similar procedures in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra.*

In promising to destroy the current reading subject in order to reveal the real abiding subject, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* like the two above sūtras, cannot avoid introducing itself into the equation for effecting this transformation. In fact, the text takes itself as the singular mediating element that will resolve the reader's relationship to his primal identity—the internal buddha—an identity that also turns out to be synonymous with the origins of the Buddhist tradition. Thus excavating it by reading correctly promises to solve all problems.

DIFFERENT SAMENESSES, AN INTRODUCTION

Before beginning a reading of this sūtra, I need to point out that modern scholarship has tended to treat the concept of the internal buddha as a philosophic topic that is supposedly best handled apart from the intricate rhetorical ploys that house it. Similarly, modern accounts of the internal buddha are often given without the benefit of a close reading of the narrative presentation of these doctrines, thus overlooking or minimizing the symbolic matrixes that support them. Consequently, in an odd sort of mimesis, just as traditional Buddhist authors urged their readers to excavate their internal buddhas, Buddhist scholars of the twentieth century performed a similar maneuver excavating this doctrine from its mythical and rhetorical matrix, thereby missing much of what makes it powerfully appealing in the Buddhist world.

In addition to this questionable gesture of turning mythology and narrative into philosophy, twentieth-century accounts of texts on the internal buddha have often presented this doctrine as a refreshing statement of human equality, presuming, it would seem, that equality is the unavoidable import of any position that posits a fully perfect universal subject in each person. The problem with this modern assumption is that it is essentially diametrically opposed to the way the doctrine is promulgated. For instance, in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* though it is said many times that all beings possess an internal buddha, this generic sameness is but the beginning of producing a gap of difference between sentient beings and (actualized) bud-

dhas. In short, it would seem that modern readers have been overeager to look past these important hierarchies, and the way they structure desire and difference, in order to find images of their own ideologies, even when the contextual evidence suggests otherwise.

The major clue to unpacking difference in the rhetoric of sameness is to see that sameness is never declared by occupants at the bottom of the hierarchy. Like the campaigning politician who claims, "I am one of you," statements of sameness come from on high and ought to be read as signifiers of difference and status. Clearly, it is only the top dogs who get to legislate sameness, and, in fact, it is that very declaration of sameness that makes them superior. Thus in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* the Buddha Śākyamuni and all the other celestial buddhas are the only ones who can see this sameness and recognize it, while everyone else has to "hear" it, read it, believe it, and, most important, desire it as something that is innately theirs even as it remains somehow estranged from them. In fact, as I argue below, offering a doctrine of sameness is actually a form of public gift-giving, with the speaker or text acting like a *padrone,* benevolently handing out the goods that would organize a community around a commitment to this shared substance while never allowing this rhetoric of sameness to rupture the hierarchy or tilt into antinomianism.[5]

FATHERS AND SONS: SUSPENDED SAMENESS

As for father-son issues, which too inevitably gravitate around a structuring of sameness and difference, much can be gained from putting the search for the internal buddha in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* next to the refathering program of the *Lotus Sūtra.* In the *Lotus Sūtra,* the reader confronts a stream of narrative characters who, in accepting the narrative of universal fathers and sons, came to realize their ultimate identity as "truly sons of the buddha." Thus, structurally, the *Lotus Sūtra* pushes the reader to reidentify himself as a son-of-the-Buddha by finding a kernel of sameness within an otherwise heterogeneous subjectivity and then to take that kernel as the basis for a complete identity. In that context, the sameness between father and son is a suspended link between the universal (father) and the particular (son-reader), a link that is both the *effect* of prior contact constitutive of the son's

5. In Chan, the *padrone* role of the textual buddha who speaks the sameness between the particular and the universal will be recast around the figure of the historical Chinese master who is shown exciting everyone with the claim that the members of the audience, the buddha, and himself are fundamentally indistinguishable, though, of course, that very right to claim sameness is the sine qua non of being a master. For the pitfalls of assuming democratic ideals in Chan rhetoric, see my "Upside Down/Right Side Up: A Revisionist History of Buddhist Funerals in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 35, no. 4 (1996): 307–38.

being—the *Lotus Sūtra* repeatedly claims that the Buddha is the father of all sentient beings—and the *cause* for the son's future culmination in sameness with the father. Hence, just in terms of structure, the doctrine of the internal buddha works in a similar fashion: one reads about being already inhabited in one's deepest subjectivity by a version of the father, a presence that secures one's current identity while also promising a singular destiny of turning into a full-fledged form of the truth-father—a buddha. In other terms, the reader suddenly discovers himself to be a bodhisattva because he learns that he carries within him a fully formed buddha that is just waiting to become manifest as his "real" identity.[6]

One could argue, then, that in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* the internal buddha plays the double-jointed role of being the father and the son at the same time. First, the internal buddha is always the father in himself and is known as such by the "speaking" buddhas in the text. Second, by his presence in the body of another being, he makes that subject a son who will in time become him but only when the son "sees" the father within him and wishes to totally identify with him, ridding himself of all that is not-father. Thus, as with fathers and sons in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the son qua inhabited subject only fully becomes "son" when he realizes that he came from the father and can only go back to the father, with his sonship no more than a temporary interlude between those states. Hence there is something of a suicide expected of the son qua reading-subject in the attainment of his final identity. Ironically, then, the son becomes one with his internal father by killing himself, as son, so that only the father remains, a thorny problem that the text does not admit, of course, but that the logic of the rhetoric cannot avoid, as we will see.

Although, structurally, we can see that this form of shaping Buddhist identity around an internal buddha has many similarities with the *Lotus Sūtra's* son-of-the-Buddha rhetoric, the father-son rhetoric in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is not nearly as developed. Still, there are at least three types of father-son tropes in this text. First, the Buddha always, until the finale, gives his teaching to bodhisattvas who are identified in the audience as "good sons" *(shan nanzi),* suggesting that these sons are the ones to be transformed as their internal buddhas are manifested as totally purified subjects equivalent to the father. Second, there are several passages that include mention of an enduring buddha nature *(foxing),* suggestive of family connections, or at least a kind of suspended identity ensured through a form of paternity.

6. I choose to use the male pronoun here and for most of the chapter, because the text is primarily a discussion between the Buddha and a male bodhisattva; furthermore, for the most part, the text introduces clauses with "a good man should . . ." This changes, however, just at the moment when the text promises its value to the reader, a change whose significance I address below.

And third, the penultimate analogy for the internal buddha is that of a future prince who is nonetheless currently located in the womb of an ugly, plebian mother. In this example it is clear that the text positions recovery of the internal buddha as something akin to regaining a lost patriline that had unexplainably been misplaced, as in the *Lotus Sūtra.*

Even with these various patriarchal elements, it is clear that these three tropes do not compare in density or function to other discussions of the father-son relationship between the subject and the Buddha as we have seen in the *Lotus Sūtra.* And yet, given how much of the material in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* seems derivative of the form and content of narratives in the *Lotus Sūtra,* I think there are good reasons for reading the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* as providing a kind of commentary on the father-son motifs in the *Lotus Sūtra,* commentary that renders literal and substantial the paternal claims in the *Lotus Sūtra.* Thus the rhetoric of fathers and sons in the *Lotus Sūtra,* which remains both Real and metaphoric, and anyway never explains the physicality of the father-son connection, appears concretized in the claim that there is an internal buddha lodged within each sentient being. Supposing that the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* borrowed, directly or indirectly, much from the *Lotus Sūtra*—and this is the current scholarly consensus—we have good reasons for interpreting the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* as an attempt to rework and radicalize the father-son doctrines in the *Lotus Sūtra.*

TRYING TO BE ONESELF

To initiate a critical interpretation of this text's program, I want to first pose several problems endemic to discourses of self-appropriation such as the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra.* Certainly at the top of this list is the question, Can the subject ever reclaim itself—like light illuminating itself, or soap washing itself? Or, bracketing for the moment the feasibility of the project, what can we say about the models or causalities that the text invokes to make the process of self-appropriation appear logical or even thinkable? Then, when this project of self-appropriation is articulated vis-à-vis real-world metaphors, such as digging gold out of a shit-pit, what kind of logics and desires are invoked in the reader? And, finally, in the text's discussion, does anyone make progress in this self-appropriation, or are there in fact simply two positions, one realized and one obscured, held apart to generate desire and longing in the reader, even as one gains confidence in the final outcome of the drama? Or put in a way that highlights the circularity of the text's promise to the reader: Is subject-transformation effected simply by accepting the promise that subject-transformation is produced through accepting a theory of subject-transformation?

These questions should be useful and can be read in conjunction with the discussion in chapter 1 about basic assumptions in the Buddhist pre-

sentation of the subject as a self-causing field, fundamentally cut away from all other matrixes. Here, though, we can focus that critique by noting that in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* the reading-subject seems to be tempted into finding closure around a subject-position that is, somewhat ironically, presented to it as object. Moreover, the tracks of desire that lead to that self-appropriation only come to fruition when they lead the reading-subject into believing that what he is imagining and desiring is, in fact, Real and thus extant apart from imagining and desiring. Hence, again, we are confronted with the complexity of discourse attempting to thingify its referents, but in this case the thingification centers on the object-nature of one's final subjectivity. This problem is particularly evident when the reader's internal buddha is described as passive, nonlinguistic, and unchanging—much like gold in a shit-pit—making it seem that the unwanted part of subjectivity, which is now being drawn into actively desiring its opposite, is actually in charge of its own execution. What supposedly remains after the death of the organic, temporal, and reading-subject is a perfectly developed similitude of buddhahood, frozen and outside of time, but perhaps not entirely dead given that images are often believed to be quite alive in Buddhist cosmology.

BELIEVING IS SEEING

To consider how these problems of self-appropriation are treated in the text, we need to stay sensitive to the way vision is created and deployed in the text's efforts to seduce the reader into accepting rhetoric as a direct reflection of the Real.[7] Though visions of various kinds are found throughout the text, they are far from simple and are often linked to one another in intricate ways. As I show in the close reading below, the fundamental goal of the text is to give the reader a vision of the external, historical Buddha who is seen looking back at the reader to confirm the presence of the internal buddha in the reader. Clearly this kind of seeing-by-reading involves the awkward and fragile situation of language fabricating the image of an external authenticator that "sees" the true internal being in the reader and parlays that vision into words that again will transcend themselves to unequivocally guarantee their referent.[8] Of course, too, it requires that the text

7. For a thoughtful discussion of the importance and prevalence of ocularity in Mahāyāna literature, see David McMahan's *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

8. An adjunct issue will be to consider how Buddhist authors attempt to make truth a visual phenomenon when there are good reasons to think that it can only be linguistic. To put it briefly, arguably truth can never be any more than a judgment about a statement. For instance, *it is true that* x or y exists, or that there is ice cream in the freezer. The existence of x, y, or ice cream can't, in effect, be true or false even when directly viewed, since the assignment of truth

jump the gap between the time of the historical Buddha and the reader's present.

In brief, then, vision in the text is constructed around a presence/absence situation wherein a textual presentation of the Buddha gains historical reality and then is relied on to see a version of himself in the reader without having to explain exactly what that internal buddha might be doing there, or how buddha-identity might be a visible thing to begin with. In short, with time, textuality, and Otherness melting away, the text draws the reader into thinking that he is seeing what the Buddha is seeing, and since it turns out that the Buddha is seeing the reader in his most perfect form, we have an odd circuit constituted as follows: the reader looks "through" the text to "see" the image of the Buddha looking "through" the reader to see his internal buddha, and thus the reader ends up seeing himself through the lens of the text's presentation of the Buddha's eyes.

In thinking about the linguistically constructed visions of "real" identity provided in the text, I want to emphasize that the reader is tempted to consume these accounts of the Buddha's vision under the assumption that no hermeneutics or interpretation is required; after all, this description of the internal buddha is to be taken as vision, not dogma.[9] I explore the text's emphasis on vision below, but as an introduction let me note the sequence for delivering information to the reader about his own identity: (1) the narrative portrayal of (2) the Buddha's oral account of (3) the Buddha's vision of the reader's identity.

Overlooking rhetoric's role in producing this dense pattern of boundary

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can only follow the comparison of a statement with a perceived or remembered aspect of reality. In short, truth claims are structured just like metaphors since they involve a "to-ing and fro-ing" between a thing and a statement about the thing. The full impact of this perspective comes due in theology when it resists claims such as "God is truth," a claim that attempts to render the always linguistic and ever-shuttling aspect of truth into a fixed ontic figure, just as the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is attempting.

9. Of course, this to-and-fro motion between the vision of the reader and the vision of the historical Buddha is rather complicated, and I can only placate the reader by noting that we moderns play similar games. For example, as I was editing this chapter, I noticed an ad for Jaguar in the *New Yorker* that commanded in large print, "Live Vicariously through Yourself" (June 3, 2000, p. 9). What this phrase presumably is inviting us to do is to be more than ourselves through the purchase of the automobile that will grant an extension of ourselves that will turn out to be ourselves. By the end of this chapter, one might rightly take a revised version of this command as a summary of this doctrine of the internal buddha: one is to become oneself through appropriating, not the perfect car, but the internal buddha as one's "realest" identity, an identity that is to be consumed through the consumption of the text which is designed to dissolve into the appearance of direct vision and absolute confidence in one's perfect being. Thus, whereas with the car, the purchase of the commodity is to disappear into a piece of one's inherent self, with the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* one is to consume the new *rhetoric* of buddha-identity and take it to be evidence of one's oldest identity—buddhahood.

crossing that results in the impression of direct apprehension is completely necessary for the text's agenda because the internal buddha of the reader must be imagined to exist on its own, not as the product of the reader's always idiosyncratic consumption of an author's always idiosyncratic rhetoric. Just as in the case of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s purveying of past sonship, the rhetoric only works if it can convince the reader of a prenarrative Real of buddha-presence already lodged in the reader and not simply imagined there through the consumption of this rhetoric. If we do not follow the text in this self-confirming curve, then it becomes clear that this doctrine which promises to initiate the most private and internal of events—self-reclamation—is actually strung between public and private spheres, with literature playing the role of *metteur en scène* and mediator, creating the spheres and then inviting the fantasy of their contact provided that the subject consumes the mediating item (the text) without any residue of "this is just a text with some idiosyncratic language in it that I happen to be reading in my always idiosyncratic manner, on this particular and unrepeatable day."[10] Or put another way, the text must suppress the obvious fact that it has set before itself the task of informing the public about their private identities through the play of dramatic figures who, in the course of their performances, seem to step out of the text and point to every reader and say: "I know you. You are the same as me, and you can become me if you accept this public text as a simple and direct commentary on your own nature."[11] Obviously, Buddhist paternity is again being created on either side of the narrative, such as was the case in the *Lotus Sūtra,* but here it has been concretized into two physical forms of buddhahood, which are constructed to collapse into sameness, once the medium that created both of them is ignored as the productive matrix for both of them.

10. In a more abstract sense one might wonder, too, if the whole notion of an interiority in the subject is created and sustained by the text's insistence on the directly perceivable interior buddha, thereby creating both an immutable subject-presence on the inside and a field to house it. By "interior," I mean something like a physical space of subjecthood, separate from the body and from all other matter. I should note that the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* regularly treats the internal buddha as a space. See, for instance, the terms "sphere of the Tathāgata" *(rulai jianjie)* and the more mundane-sounding "place of the Tathāgata" *(rulai cangchu),* T.12.221b.9.

Just as 2-D can perfectly render 3-D, the notion of an interior to the subject may be redundant or worse, fundamentally misguided. This kind of questioning, though, opens up onto the much larger problem of whether language, and the intersubjectivity it generates, is not in fact responsible for generating our sense of interior space, both in ourselves and in the Other.

11. For a point of comparison with the figure of the Buddha stepping out of his textual constraints to directly address the reader, one might consider Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo,* whose plot is fundamentally built around an actor leaving the silver screen to join the audience.

PURE SUBJECTHOOD WAITING TO PURIFY ITSELF

Another key problem in establishing this desire for oneself-cum-buddha is that this structure doubles purity: purity is both oddly present in the presuccess phase in which the internal buddha is found surrounded by impurity and then fully pure in the postsuccess purity when the "liberated" buddha resides with just itself, suggesting, quite evidently, that we have two levels of purity, a perspective very useful for reading Chan material. Clearly, this doubling of purity interacts with the double forms of subjectivity, apparently working to draw the reader into hoping to quite literally get inside the "clean" part of himself, the part that is nevertheless shown to be whole.[12]

To imagine the structure of this involuting project, one might wonder what role the exclusion of impurity plays in this collapse of the impure (reading) subject into the pure internal buddha, which appears as the part-that-is-to-become-the-whole. Actually, this part/whole problem rests on an even more basic dialect between purity and impurity that is formed around the mutual dependence of the unwanted, dirty particular part of the subject on its perfect, universal "better half," wherein the universal appears most aptly defined as what is left after the particular has been banished, a postnegation form produced in the execution and elimination of the random and polluting particular. Raising the question of dialectical dependence between the particular and the universal, or between purity and impurity, will lead to the suspicion that part of purity qua the universal is the purity of forgetting or suppressing its dialectical relationship with impurity and the particular. Obviously, the text would like to present purity as self-caused, just like the internal buddha, for in essence they are the same thing, and to assert otherwise would rupture the dualistic ontology that supports this system.

To better position these questions about negation, purity, and dialectics, it needs to be pointed out that there are actually two negations required in this schema. The first one is not announced, but it is that crucial moment when the reader assents to identifying exclusively with the universal, the pure and complete buddha-figure, thereby agreeing that his rightful being is one with the internal buddha and consequently disavowing his relationship to his particular, contingent being, now identified as nettlesome afflictions. Actually, in this identification with the internal buddha there is already required a fundamental cut in reality, a cut between all real subjectivity, which is the sole purview of buddhas, and every other form of subjectivity in the universe that has the dubious status of being negative and afflict-

12. Slavoj Žižek discusses a similar situation of the part transformed into the whole in his reading of Hegel in "Fetishism and Its Vicissitudes," in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 92: "In other words, in the choice between the Whole and its Part, one has to choose the Part and elevate it to the Principle of the Whole."

ing. So, based on assenting to the cut of the first negation and its accompanying reidentification (one is truly only that internal buddha cut away from everything else), the second round of negation will "physically" remove the particular polluting afflictions from the pure universal that the reader has just laid claim to.

One perspective that we recover in tracing out this maneuver is the way that the first promise of the internal buddha is actually giftlike but with several submerged segments. The certainty of an internal buddha is offered gratuitously to the reader as an ontological fact, a fact that we can presume the reader would be delighted to know, provided he or she is Buddhist. However, this gift comes with the requirement of committing oneself to bringing that identification to closure, a process that must end with the collapse of the reader into the universal. That much is clear, but this gift-structure has another edge too since the gift of the internal buddha is only "real" if it comes from a real buddha who is not, in fact, giving gifts but is impartially speaking truth. This means that the text, in proclaiming that there is a buddha *there* in the reader, requires the reader to grant that there is a buddha *there* in the space of writing/speaking. In short, the text cannot admit the cycle of giving the reader a buddha he did not have in return for the reader giving the text a buddha that the writer did not have, or the whole project would collapse.

To really sense the power of this equation, one simply needs to imagine a reader rejecting this discourse as fabricated. In that rejection he loses three things: the "voice" of the Buddha, direct access to the font of tradition, and, of course, what had been a track leading to the establishment of a replica of that buddha within his own body. To reject the text, after one has read it, is to deny what every Buddhist would have hoped to find—that fundamental sameness between themselves and the universal, a sameness that would bridge all gaps of time, difference, and mediation.

The intruding dialectical difficulties of offering the fantasy of this kind of nondialectical closure in total sameness are intensified in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* when the discourse on internal purification comes around to offer itself as an object of worship that will effect that purification, provided one believes in it with total purity. In this promise, a discourse that relied on the reader seeing-right-through-the-text now has to present itself to the reader as pure object which will take him, when treated correctly, to his own "pure internal object." (This problem of the disappearing and reappearing physicality of the text was mentioned in the preceding chapter but is developed in a slightly different manner below.)

How the text entices the reader into imagining these various purities free of textuality, discourse, and hermeneutics is complicated further by the presentation of eight analogies *(biyu)* drawn from nature, or at least "normal" life, that are offered to explain the effect the text wishes to have on the

reader. In these eight analogies the text tries to naturalize its position by relying rather heavily on what I provisionally call "nature metaphors," even though the text's project is dedicated to removing natural processes and anything related to time in general. Thus this reliance on "the natural" to explain the new and unnatural ends up looking like the most ideological and impossible aspect of the text. This is not to suggest that these natural metaphors aren't still quite seductive and alluring. Assuredly they are, but when looked at more carefully, they all tend to run off-track into self-defeating counterexamples.

For instance, in the first analogy given in the text, bees around a hive in a tree are likened to the afflictions that need to be removed to extract the honey qua internal buddha. The problem obviously is that bees make honey, and you cannot have honey without bees, and worse, you cannot have bees without honey, so the example ends up suggesting a fully dialectical circle in which the removal of one item destroys its counterpart. The only way that the text gets this scenario to work is to transform the dialectical situation into a onetime event with the intrusion of the "clever man" *(you yi ren qiao)* who thinks of a way to steal the honey by first getting rid of the bees. The problem is that introducing this external agent represents a complete rupture of the system of mapping bees and honey on to afflictions and the internal buddha, for suddenly we have a third party, a new agent working on the pair bees-honey, one of which, the honey, is already supposed to represent an agent qua subject of sorts. In short, the analogy asks the reader to be both the honey and the man getting the honey, and this was just the problem that I raised above in speaking of the subject trying to step into a part of himself. Furthermore, the clever man is likened to the Buddha in the text, a buddha teaching techniques to sentient beings, and thus the clever man does double duty representing the listener's task of getting at "his own honey" and the Buddha's task of getting the reader to accept the first task, getting the reader to get at his honey, that is.

With an overview of the text's structure and these basic theoretical problems in view, let us turn to a close reading.

A CLOSE READING

The narrative of *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* like most early Mahāyāna works, begins with a description of the audience in attendance at the teaching site of Rājagṛha. However, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is somewhat different from the texts considered thus far for the reason that no Hīnayāna monks are mentioned by name. We are simply told that there were a great many of them there. This exclusion of specific characters like Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, or Subhūti is underscored later when, after a long list of the bodhisattvas on site, the author chose to have the text's discourse occur between

the Buddha and a bodhisattva, thereby bypassing a key gesture for including pre-Mahāyāna figures in a Mahāyāna discourse.

In the list of named bodhisattvas, there are many names that are not names so much as descriptions of powers, attributes, and functions. Thus we have, in addition to bodhisattvas with familiar names such as Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, bodhisattvas with names such as Dispeller of All Disease Bodhisattva, Elephant Musk Bodhisattva, and the misogynistic Transformer of Women's Bodies Bodhisattva. This last name is to be understood as the promise that this bodhisattva can be relied on to change women into men in their next rebirth, a function that apparently was regularly offered to women in Mahāyāna texts. I point this out not to draw undue attention to a standard piece of Buddhist chauvinism but because this perspective helps to interpret the way "Good Sons" is used as the preferred form of address for the audience, even though Good Daughters are included at several later junctures.

Given the various powers announced in these latter bodhisattvas' names, it is not surprising that the text positions them much closer to buddhas and quite beyond the ken of sentient beings. In particular, the text adds the extravagant promise, "If any sentient beings hear their names, they will achieve non-reversibility with regard to the unsurpassed path."[13] Given the power and allure of these bodhisattvas, it is curious that the text offers the reader a buddha-identity but not a bodhisattva-identity: nowhere in this discourse is the reader asked to consider himself or herself a bodhisattva or to generate the kind of universal compassion that we assume goes with this figure. As per the discussions in the previous chapters, this text is simply trying to evoke desire in the reader to find a new subjectivity centered on this very discourse, and there is nothing here to substantiate the claim that one's buddhahood is for the Other. Thus again we have a Mahāyāna text that seems largely bereft of the elements deemed paramount in standard definitions of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

With the bodhisattva list finished and supplemented with mention of other celestial beings, such as *nāgas* and *gandharvas,* who have gathered at the teaching site, the Buddha is described sitting in a *samādhi* from whence he manifests the magic display *(shenbian)* in which the audience sees limitless numbers of thousand-petaled lotuses in the sky. The lotuses are the size of cart wheels, multicolored, fragrant, yet unopened. Though the audience does not know it yet, the omniscient narrator informs the reader that each lotus has within it a transformation buddha *(huafo),* which in the technical description of various buddha bodies means a buddha appearing in historical "reality."

13. T.16.457a.6.

In beholding these wondrous lotuses that fill the sky and cover the world like a jeweled banner, it's clear that we are to conclude that the Buddha can make life-forms appear as he wishes. More exactly, with the lotuses hanging in the sky, the text is emphasizing the Buddha's powers to reorganize reality as he wishes. These lotuses are manifested, as usual, without their supporting matrixes of mud, stems, water, and so on. Moreover, these "cutaway" flowers serve as the seat for the buddha-figures, which themselves ought to be understood as beings cut away from any other previous matrix, be it family, history, womb, and so on. Then in a detail that mixes the flowers and their internal buddhas, the text informs us that these lotus flowers are all emitting light, a detail that further denaturalizes them, even as it joins them to their internal buddhas, who will continue emitting light even after their flower cover is gone. In fact, in perfect unison, the flowers then open, revealing to the audience at Rājagṛha that each flower had within its petals a perfect buddha, seated in meditative posture, emitting countless rays of light. And then, by the Buddha's powers *(fo shenli),* the flowers suddenly wilt and rot.

That the text mentions it is by the Buddha's power that the flowers suddenly wilt warrants some reflection. This comment seems redundant insofar as the whole scene was said to be created from his magical powers, but repeating the Buddha's agency just at the moment that the flowers die seems to reinforce the idea that their death is not a natural one understood as part of a sequence of the life cycle. We might even be inclined to think that the author wants to imply that the Buddha killed these flowers in order to reveal the buddhas to the audience. Even without this assumption we might fairly ask, Why do these flowers have to die? Certainly, the Buddha could have opened the lotuses to reveal the buddhas and left the flowers relatively intact, or again, he could have had them release their buddhas and fall from heaven to delight the crowd. Given that flowers rarely wilt and die in Buddhist sūtras, and more rarely by the power of the Buddha, we ought to suspect that this death has larger significance for the rest of the narrative.[14]

The audience's reaction to this scene gives us our first clue about the narrative value of these dead flowers. Watching the display, the audience is impressed and delighted, but they are also disturbed and perplexed and want to know specifically why the flowers wilted and were suddenly *(huran)* destroyed. This unease is presumably due in part to the suddenness of their death, but it also in reaction to the lingering presence of the dead flowers,

14. Taking care of withered flowers is mentioned briefly in chapter 7 of the *Lotus Sūtra.* See Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 119. It is also mentioned in *The Longer Land of Bliss Sūtra,* see Luis O. Gómez, trans., *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), p. 90.

which are said to be putrid and disgusting. Thus, oddly, the presentation of infinite forms of buddha-presence requires the execution of living things whose death lingers onstage as something to be explained and thus a source of narrative motivation, as this doubt and discomfort will be the pulsion for the following discussion. In fact, we ought to say that the entire discussion that follows flows out of these dead flowers because this doubt will lead to the selection of Vajramati from the audience, a figure who will beseech the Buddha to explain the sequence of flowers to dead flowers to buddhas, a request that then leads to homologizing this vision with the eight analogies. Presumably, if the Buddha had just shown the audience the limitless glowing buddhas without this life and death sequence for the flowers, there wouldn't be much to talk about.

Such is the vision that inaugurates the discussion, but two further points are worth pursuing. First, though this vision is defined as magical, it is still presumably real, with real effects on the audience at Rājagṛha—"there were none who were not disgusted"—and at the very least the vision is more real than other things "shown" in this text. How do we know this? The other major set of "visions" produced in the eight analogies are presented explicitly as analogies *(biyu)* and never are said to have any effect on the audience. They are simply linguistic devices presented to further the imagination of the Real, as promoted by the text. Here, in the magically produced scene, the images come with enough reality to produce consternation and disgust, along with the desire to understand, which then leads into the analogies for separating buddhas from surrounding matrixes as "seen" in a less dramatic manner in the purely linguistic exercises to follow.[15] Second, we have to say that this magic created problems, problems that only language could fix. Though the Buddha seems able to manifest real phenomena at will, the narrative presupposes that the limit of his power is actually quite strict, and in the end it is only language that can be offered to lessen the anxiety that he created by his magic. Presumably, with a little more magical power, he could have simply zapped the crowd into total knowledge, or produced a vision that clarified all questions about the first vision. But this was not allowed to happen, and instead we have a narrative that created a vision that needed a narrative to complete it.

Put more fully, in establishing a magical introduction to his discourse, the author sets his text on a slide down from the Real of vision into the linguistic and analogic. We started with a narrative peopled with supposedly real beings, who were then shown a vision of magically produced but still

15. This disgust is never removed, in fact, and the vision is never closed back up into its progenitor, or relieved with a final sweeping away. Either this is a bit of sloppiness on the author's part or this magical appearance is purposely left hanging in the air for other narrative purposes.

quasi-real beings (the lotuses and their internal buddhas), but this vision did not produce wisdom but the need for language. Thus, to ameliorate the trauma of the vision, the Buddha turned to language in the form of the eight analogies, but it is clear that these analogies rely on strange metaphoric transpositions that move farther and farther from the reality of human being that they are supposed to reveal. For instance, a statue in the shit-pit and seed in the chaff are employed as analogies for the presence of the internal buddha in all sentient beings, but none of these examples gets close to the exactitude of the vision of the buddhas in the flowers. In short, the text is dedicated to explaining the reality of human existence, but it is tilted away from the Real it wishes to express and is headed into the purely linguistic and metaphoric.

After the vision and the troubled response it provoked in the audience, Vajramati stands out from the crowd to converse with the Buddha, but first he restates the narrative as something that he himself *saw,* thereby replacing the omniscient narrator. Following this, he restates the vision yet again in verse. This leads to a crucial statement by the Buddha that explains the vision, the narrative about the vision, and overall ontology intended by the text:[16]

> At this time, the World Honored One said to Vajramati and all the bodhisattvas, "Good Sons *(shan nanzi),* there is a Mahāyāna Vaipulya Sūtra called 'Tathāgatagarbha,' and it is because I want to preach it that I manifested this auspicious sign. You should all carefully listen to it, and ponder [what I'm about to preach]."
>
> All the bodhisattvas said, "Excellent, we would be willing and happy to hear [this discourse]."
>
> The Buddha said, "Good Sons, just as *(ru)* I manifested the innumerable lotuses and suddenly wilted them [to reveal] the buddhas inside these flowers, buddhas adorned with the [buddha] marks, seated in meditative posture, emitting light which when sentient beings saw it, made them all respect them—just like this *(rushi),* Good Sons, I, with my buddha eye, perceive that all sentient beings, [though] in the midst of all the afflictions of greed, desire, anger, and ignorance, have Tathāgata wisdom, the Tathāgata eye, and the Tathāgata body, which sits in meditative posture, solemnly *(yanran),* without moving. Good Sons, all sentient beings, though they be in any of the different places of rebirth, in their body of afflictions there is a hidden Tathāgata *(you rulai cang)* which is always present without being polluted. It has the marks of merit complete, and it is just like me with no differences."

This passage is crucial for at least two reasons. First, it folds the narrative back on itself making the first part of the narrative—the frame that estab-

16. T.16.457b.23.

lishes the setting and the magical introduction—appear outside the "inner" narrative of the text. This is a common enough occurrence in Mahāyāna texts wherein the text turns on itself to establish its facticity and legitimate place in real events, even if these "real events" might seem magical and thus unhistorical to modern readers. Second, much like the *Lotus Sūtra,* it establishes a causal track whereby the publicly displayed vision of external buddhas is taken as the basis or introduction for a discourse about the buddha within each sentient being. Thus narrative action is structured around a kind of mimesis between the magical vision of "real" external buddhas, available to all observers onstage, and the direct vision of the Buddha, which is his alone but which is still "real" and is to be faithfully given to the reader via this circuitous route of narrative and the mimesis that is has worked up for itself.

With regard to the homology between these two types of seeing in the narrative, we ought to note that while the vision of the flower-held buddhas is a narrative event, the second type of seeing in which the Buddha observes the internal buddha within each sentient being never is recounted as such a specific happening in the "historical" moment at Rājagṛha and is in fact invoked primarily via this mimesis. The above passage twice uses the phrase "just as," making clear that the text presents vision of the magical flowers, real as it is, as an analogy for this other kind of seeing, a privilege of the Buddha Śākyamuni, which apparently can only be made known to sentient beings in language and, in particular, via metaphor and analogy. Thus the text positions the reader to participate in a public vision of limitless (and anonymous) buddhas which then gives way to a secondary disclosure on the reader's internal (private) buddha, which is seen only by the Buddha Śākyamuni, who only can make his vision into everyone's internal buddha public via language and by way of analogy to the first type of vision, which itself is, after all, linguistically produced by the narrative.

The doubling of buddha-visions in the magical and the ontological comes with another doubling that is rather telling. What the text had relied on for all this transcendent vision is called the "buddha-eye," and the nature of this eye is explained in the next passage vis-à-vis another type of seeing, a clairvoyance attributed to heavenly beings and advanced adepts. Presumably, the author trusted that the audience would accept this parallel as self-evident and not "magical" at all:[17]

> "For example *(biru),* one with the heavenly eye *(tianyan)* could see the body of a Tathāgata seated in meditative posture in the interior *(huanei)* of the as yet unopened flowers, but the manifestation *(xianxian)* [of the buddhas] was only achieved when the wilted flowers were dispersed. Just like this *(rushi),* Good

17. T.16.457c.3; emphasis added.

> Sons, the Buddha, having seen that there is a hidden Tathāgata in sentient beings, wishes to open them *(kaifu),* and thus preaches sūtras and dharmas in order to dispel and eradicate the afflictions so as to manifest the buddha nature *(foxing).*"

This passage works to create yet another type of vision, that of the clairvoyant, which will support and legitimize that difficult-to-prove buddha-vision. This clairvoyant vision is one step up from the normal vision because as the miracle was under way, clairvoyant types could see through the lotus petals into the buddhas housed therein, though presumably they cannot see through sentient beings' bodies into that internal buddha.[18] Hence, not counting the reader's gaze "into" the text, we have three levels of seeing the Real within the text's perimeter, and they all balance against one another: the Buddha's, the audience's, and supernatural observers like those with the heavenly eye.

Taken together with the preceding passage, we have a rather dense circle of signification that can be schematized as follows: (1) a narrative produces a magical display, a display that the narrative then explained as the beginning of the narrative in a self-enclosing gesture; (2) the display thus manifested also produced doubts about what was seen, and these doubts led into an explanatory narrative that compares vision of this display to two other kinds of vision; (3) finally, with the Buddha's vision couched in these two other types of vision, the Buddha's vision back on sentient beings is explained as the primary cause of discourse—we are told that it is because he sees these internal buddhas that he speaks sūtras and dharmas, certainly including this one. This final point of enclosure also brings with it the additional weight of reality insofar as this vision of the Buddha's into the reality of sentient being's nature can, after a fashion, point to the text as a visible effect of itself.

The rest of the text will continue to bounce between these three types of vision, but it will add a fourth—the vision provided by the eight analogies, each of which presents a kind of visual proof of just the kind of reality that the text is seeking for the presence of the internal buddha. In short, the text has become a "seeing machine" with almost all its rhetoric dedicated to producing visions of the real, ironically, through the consumption of literature. In the flow of narration, this rhyme between the Buddha's vision and the vision that he offered to the public leads into the following section, which

18. Interestingly, the narrative itself had given us this kind of clairvoyant pre-view since it told us that there were buddhas in those flowers before the Buddha actually opened them. Thus from the start the "eyes of the narrative" seem to be predictive of other "real" eyes that are brought onstage to do various kinds of work. In general the text is intent on getting us to see what the Buddha sees, but since this is precisely what we do not see, the author had to conjure up several alternative types of vision that would explain and sanctify this vision.

is the set of eight analogies invoked to clarify the notion of the internal buddha, each concluded with the comment that in just as "Real" a manner as one, for instance, sees a statue in a shit-pit, so too does the Buddha actually see the internal buddha within all sentient beings.[19]

In each of the eight analogies to follow, we are asked to "see" a once-concealed content in just the manner of this initial revelation of the external buddhas, stripping away an unwanted natural substance to reveal a treasured interior; the difference is that these eight analogies remain linguistic and are openly announced as figures of speech, whereas the miracle was real, visual, public, and historical in the sense of occurring on some plane of the real as established by the statement that this occurred ten years after the Buddha's enlightenment. Thus we have an introduction that not only serves to verify and "historicize" the narrative, which turns out to be largely about analogies, but also sets the template for interpreting these analogies in a realistic, "visual" manner, with each analogy reflected or rhymed back to this prior event.[20]

19. Michael Zimmerman, "The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra:* Its Basic Structure and Relation to the *Lotus Sūtra,*" in *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology,* 2 (1999), p. 149, argues that it is only the section that follows that is the real referent of the text's declaration about itself: "It can only be this section [the metaphors to follow] which, under the name *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* has already been taught by the Tathāgata Sadāpramuktaraśmi (section D). The similes are the *actual Sūtra within the Sūtra.* They *alone* embody the new and central message of the text, embedded in the more or less standard framework consisting of the setting, a passage expounding the merit of propagating the sūtra and a story of the past" (emphasis added).

While I agree that much of the form of this sūtra echoes other Mahāyāna sūtras, the *Lotus Sūtra* in particular, I don't think it makes sense to avoid the dialectical way that the sūtra works on itself by assuming an "actual sūtra within the sūtra" that can be directly linked to the sūtra's title and set apart from the surrounding play of self-referencing. This hope of excavating a core text apart from its supporting matrix, as I argued above, is essentially parallel to the text's call to find a core within the subject and comes with quite a few drawbacks. For instance, as soon as we make this interpretive move, we miss a chance to consider and integrate the structure and complexity of the text that determine how it actually works as a piece of literature. Too, to read the text by isolating a piece of the narrative as the real referent of the narrative's discussion of itself suppresses the role that this kind of self-referencing plays in Mahāyāna texts and obfuscates the centrality of just this string of parallelisms that the text is clearly establishing for the reader. Thus to seek a core to the text apart from its "standard framework" falls into the assumption that this text, and others like it, is actually straightforward philosophical teachings that can be paired down to basic statements apart from their clever literary structures. Surely it is clear that meaning in the text is coded for very specific kinds of worshipful reception and to ignore that is, again, to read religious literature mistakenly looking for content apart from form and seduction. This is, in effect, like reading the Gospels looking for what Jesus said, apart from the altogether more important literary format that creates the identity of Jesus and leads one into just this desire of wanting to know what he said.

20. Here I am using "rhyme" in the sense of the English expression, "for no rhyme or reason," which nicely implies that these are the only two ways of legitimizing anything. There may be, too, in this expression the subtle hint that a rhyme is as good as a reason insofar as both produce legitimacy via reference to something else: a precedent or a preestablished logic.

In short, the text has organized itself as a metaphor, though this was not stated explicitly. The reason the magical vision counts as a metaphor for the Buddha's vision and the analogic examples to come is not just that the pieces are connected by phrases of "just as" but also by the way the Buddha claims that he wants to do to sentient beings what he did to the flowers in the vision. The text specifies that because he sees that internal buddha in all sentient beings, he wants to cause the sentient beings to "open and bloom" *(kaifu)* under the influence of his teaching.[21] These verbs "open and bloom" obviously echo what happened to the flowers and clearly give the reader the sense that in fact he too is a flower, and has a buddha within him, as those flowers did. Of course, then, the "visible" outcome of the flower miracle then rests as an already accomplished version of what the narrative is promising to do to the reader.

With these elaborate systems of signification and "vision" established, along with the text's authority, the narrative turns to have the Buddha explain the eight analogies.

THE ANALOGIES

Let us begin with a basic question: Why did this author, like the author of the *Lotus Sūtra,* put so much stock in the power of analogy, a term that I use loosely for the moment? To say that this was chosen as expedient means for unsophisticated readers surely misses the mark. These analogies are not for the slow and unimaginative. Quite the contrary. A survey of Mahāyāna texts gives the impression that analogies and metaphors in fact have been essential for Mahāyāna sūtra literature in general. The author of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* also seems to have felt that metaphors and analogies were sufficiently edifying to be the centerpiece of a new statement of Buddhist doctrine. The question remains, Why? What's in an analogy or metaphor that so powerfully draws authors to them in the hope of drawing readers into new programs of self-identification?

Without embarking on a long tangent about the constitutional affinity between metaphors and definitions of reality (i..e., along the line of map and territory), one reason for the abundance of metaphors and analogies in Mahāyāna literature has to be that they allow for the creation and "verification" of an unseen reality, be it external or internal. Religion, it would seem, is always in the position of talking about unseen causalities, unseen internal substances, unseen connections, and so forth. Consequently, analogy is a convenient way to sketch links between a transcendental, invisible

21. This particular phrase appears once T.16.457c.6, but there are several other similar binomes used. For instance, several versions of "open and manifest" are also used (*kaixian* 457c.22; *kaifa* 458a.6; and *kaihua* 458a.23).

reality and a visible and indisputable one by arguing that the transcendental one is like the familiar one in some certain aspects. However, and still speaking generally, I think we have to say that part of this linking goes deeper and hopes to establish interlocking patterns of sameness between here and there. This assumption of matching and linked orders leads to imagining strategies of control based on positing parallel patterns of cause and effect, thus allowing for the promotion of activity here that will bear fruit there, as given in the most basic Buddhist metaphor: farming equals morality with all the seed and soil metaphors in place to make karmic efforts appear agrarian.

Both these points spill into the third, and that is that analogies are often relied on to link the individual to an explanation of unseen realities. Here the key point is that metaphors and analogies are about identifying sameness-in-difference such that an analogy, as its name suggests, can be relied on to produce analogs in the subjects who are consuming the analogies. All three of these issues bear on the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* with the last being perhaps most evident but the other two being equally indispensable. From the beginning, the rhetorical work of this text has been to convince readers of a fundamental sameness between the perfect spokesperson, the Buddha, and the reader, who is informed that his or her only real identity is a perfect duplicate of the speaker of the text, a vision that he cannot see but needs to "see" in a secondary form, that is, by analogy.

With these problems in mind, let us consider the eight analogies: (1) Honey in a tree surrounded by bees, (2) A kernel in the chaff, (3) Gold in a shit-pit, (4) A poor family with a hidden treasure, (5) The seed of a mango tree, (6) A statue wrapped in rags, (7) An ugly, poor woman pregnant with a son who will be a world ruler, and (8) A statue just forged, still black from the fires, and upside down. A couple of things are immediately evident in this list. First, there is an odd mix of living and inanimate examples: two seeds and a fetus in the category of life versus gold, treasures, and two gold statues, with honey as an inanimate thing that nonetheless is rather close to a life cycle. This suggests that the author found items in either realm suitable to serve as paradigms for the internal buddha. Second, some of these valued but hidden realities are present and some are postponed. The seeds and fetus certainly are not visible in the present as the final items that they are destined to become. The gold, treasures, and statues obviously are already in their final state, and seem decidedly outside of time. Third, some of these items, the statues in particular, are culturally produced items and thus seem at odds with the naturalness asserted for the internal buddha. Fourth, there seems to be no order or ascension to the list; it simply is a list with no charge or progression attached to its totality.

On the whole, I would argue that this heterogeneous collection of analogies that bounces between the living and the dead is actually set up to do

just that—bounce between the living and the dead. The internal buddha as some kind of conscious being who will be the real internal subject needs to be alive, yet its perfection and its radical severance from time suggest a much more deathlike presence that comes with purity, fixity, and transcendence. In short, the author needs a variety of analogies to cover the ontology of this internal buddha whose presence he is hoping to evoke for the reader. In many ways, given that the speaking Buddha sees a silent seated buddha within each being, this internal buddha is going to tend toward the statuesque, yet still must be provided with a modicum of life.[22]

To see how this rhetorical pitch is to work, let us return to the honey and bee example.. The analogy follows in the wake of a verse from the Buddha that ends with the line, "Having seen with my buddha-eye that in the body of all sentient beings there is a hidden buddha *(focang)* invisibly residing *(yinzhu),* I preach the dharma to cause [them] to open and manifest [this buddha] *(kaixian).*"[23]

> Again, good sons, for example, it is like pure honey in a towering tree with countless bees around it, protecting it.[24] At some time, [should] there be a clever man who knew of a skillful means *(fangbian)* to first disperse the bees and then take the honey, he could thereby eat as much of the honey as he liked, or give it away to those near and far. Just in this way, good sons, all sentient beings have the hidden buddha *(rulai cang)* which is like this pure honey in the towering tree, covered over *(fubi)* by all the different afflictions. And, just as this honey is protected by swarms of bees, I, with my buddha-eye, actually *(rushi)* perceive it [the internal buddha], and use skillful means *(fangbian)* to preach dharma according to the circumstances in order to dispel and destroy the afflictions so as to open/reveal the buddha [within] and make it visible; [thus it is that] I extensively offer buddha-deeds *(foshi)* for the world.

In addition to the interesting problem of the multiplication of subjects into a clever man and honey qua internal buddha, mentioned above, I want to point out the crucial way that there are actually two analogies here. The first is the obvious one of honey to internal buddha; the second is constructed around comparing the visibility of the honey and bees to the visibility of the internal buddha in the vision of the buddha-eye. Thus in reading the passage one gets not just a vision of the internal buddha but also a vision of the Buddha's vision of the internal buddha. The passage, "And, just as this honey is protected by swarm of bees, I, with my buddha-eye, actually *(rushi)*

22. Probably the two statue examples carry slightly more weight, first because there are two of them and then because they reflect the first magical vision most directly: the removal of something distasteful to reveal a beautiful buddha.

23. T.16.457c.21.

24. Grosnick reads *yan* as "cave," but it can also simply mean "towering" in the sense of perched on a cliff face or steep slope, and that seems to make more sense here.

perceive it," serves to validate the validator, since the real-world facticity of honey and bees is now set to work to support the transcendent vision of the Buddha and not just the reality of an internal buddha.[25]

In the interest of keeping this discussion reasonably short, I will skip the kernel in the chaff analogy as it works in a parallel fashion. The third analogy is the gold in the shit-pit, which is particularly interesting:[26]

> Again, good sons, for example, it is as if pure gold fell in a place of impurity, and sunk from view. In the passing years, the gold didn't deteriorate yet nobody was able to know [of its presence]. However, if one with the heavenly eye could tell the people, "There is a real gold statue in these impurities, you could take it out and use it." Just like this, good sons, the place of impurities is just the limitless afflictions; the pure gold is just the hidden Tathāgata. The one [in the analogy] with the heavenly eye is called the Tathāgata. Thus the Tathāgata, in order to offer buddha-deeds *(foshi)*, widely preaches dharma, causing all sentient beings to dispel and destroy the afflictions, making all achieve perfect enlightenment.

This analogy works much like the honey and bees, though the inclusion of the Buddha's vision is made explicit here as the Buddha's vision is doubled and secured by the introduction of the one with the heavenly eye. As with the honey, agency is a problem here too. The group of people are invited by the one with a heavenly eye to pull the gold out and use it, thereby putting them unavoidably outside of the subject-place that they were to inhabit.

The structure of this analogy is quite parallel to the following analogy, the one of the poor family with an unknown treasure *(zhen baocang)*. One nice detail, though, is added, as this example includes that the unknown treasure cannot speak to say, "Here I am," to the poor family and thus its present-value remains silent and unknown. As before, the way ignorance and the silence of the treasure get mapped over on to sentient beings suggests that the final subject position is rather non-subject-like. The Buddha explains:[27]

> There is a hidden dharma treasure inside their bodies, which doesn't hear, and doesn't know that it is entrapped and seduced by the five desires, and thus spins in the cycle of life and death, receiving limitless suffering. Thus all the buddhas appear in the world in order to open/reveal the hidden buddha within the body of all sentient beings, [provided sentient beings] would just believe and accept this, and purify all their knowledges.

25. Grosnick leaves out one of the phrases about the honey and bees and thus misses that within the analogy of honey to internal buddha, there is this other analogy of the visibility of the honey and bees to the visibility of the internal buddha in the vision of the buddha-eye.

26. T.16.458a.24.

27. T.16.458b.13.

In this analogy, the internal buddha is not just positioned as a passive treasure to be mined by the activity of the external buddhas, it also seems deprived of consciousness, as it has no language or self-perception. This passage, like the others, emphasizes the radical difference between the two kinds of buddhas. The external buddha in the text sees, knows, speaks, and, most important, performs these attractive linguistic functions for the benefit of his audiences each member of which has within him a copy of that external buddha, even if it is not a functioning copy. Thus, clearly, the internal buddha is the opposite of the speaking Buddha, being deprived of consciousness and unable to know its relationship to the universal.

On first glance there is nothing in this discussion that explains how the internal buddha is to be revived from his mute, unconscious state into a full subject-position. Thus the reader is in a complicated relationship with himself, just as the external buddha is in a complicated relationship with the internal buddha. So how is the reader to become one with this internal buddha? He knows now that it is possible and desirable to do so, but the mechanism for recovery is not explained in the analogies themselves, other than we know that the external Buddha believes that teaching sūtras and dharmas is the way to open up and manifest this internal buddha.

In fact, it would seem, as we will see in a moment, that access to the internal buddha comes from believing the discourse on the internal buddha. Thus if belief in the discourse is defined as the technique for achieving the goals of the discourse, then according to the text's logic, one might think that skillful means should refer to the way the Buddha gets the reader to believe in his explanation of his skillful means. In all this, there is a definite blurring of skillful means for evoking desire for this project in the reader and the skillful means demonstrated in the narrative for actually achieving this goal, the case of the clever man getting at the honey, for example. Thus, just like showing Śāriputra the compassionate father's skillful means in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s Parable of the Burning House, here seducing the reader into believing that the Buddha is working, linguistically, for our buddhahood is supposedly enough to consummate that project.

But there is more complexity here, and it comes in the extravagant powers promised for belief in this entire structure of truth and skillful means and in the way belief is presented in concert with purity. The reader is promised that in purifying his belief in the text, one begins to close the gap between (1) the prior, second-rate purity of having the internal buddha and (2) the final purity of simply being the internal buddha with no more distorting afflictions. Thus the text has constructed a bargain in which the reader is promised that by purifying his relationship to the text he will assuredly purify his "relationship" to his internal buddha. Other practices are mentioned but with apparently little enthusiasm, since in just a moment, we see that practices such as giving and meditation

will be cast aside in favor of just adopting this text, or even just one of these analogies.

ONE'S OWN WORST ENEMY

Thinking carefully about the tension between "pure reading" and the ontological purity promised from such a reading, we ought to note that there is an odd sort of resistance between these two poles of impure and pure buddhas. Of course, it is the reader who is both, but he also appears as some kind of hindrance between the two that must disappear in the conclusion of the procedure. Surely the reader as reader is the one who hears and sees for the internal buddha and thus becomes a conduit for the emergence of the internal buddha as "his" final subject-position, but this reader is only fully "conducting" (like copper) insofar as he disappears in the process, leaving the two buddhas, external and internal, in the final state of purity occasioned by the reader's collapse into the internal buddha. This is the suicide model that I mentioned in my introductory comments, for the reader, like the bees or the dead flowers, is precisely that which has to be sent away.

Though the reader's autoexclusion has this alchemical-like function in the sequence, he also is saddled with a brand of interference explained as the afflictions, spoken of at each turn as that encumbering set of disturbances that hides the internal buddha. But there is a curious slide in the narrative from taking the afflictions as general resistance to making them specifically into resistance to the text itself. Thus in the passage above the Buddha says that he can effect this work, "[provided sentient beings] would just believe and accept this, and purify all their knowledges." This line parallels one pronounced earlier, "If bodhisattvas believe and are happy with this doctrine, concentrate on it in their practice, then they will achieve liberation."[28] Thus the reader as afflicted interference can, in taking the discourse as true, purify himself and allow the internal buddha to emerge as a full copy of the external buddha. This implies that the text and the internal buddha are set up as parallel objects of devotion whereby accepting the text in total purity brings one one's final identity of purity. In terms of self-appropriation, the text is saying that perfect self-appropriation occurs when a discourse on perfect self-appropriation is perfectly appropriated.

In short, the text is seductive because, once it has offered itself as the doorway to buddhahood and authenticity, it floats as the objectified form of tradition (and the historical Buddha), which promises to be able to resurrect tradition and the historical Buddha for the reader, provided it is treated as tradition and the historical Buddha. As usual, then, traditional authenticity is designed around accepting the text as authentic in order that it can

28. T.16.457c.10.

return that authenticity to the reader. Or better, once the text's analogic relationship to tradition, the voice of the Buddha, the vision of the Buddha, and so on, is taken literally (i.e., a bit different but fundamentally the same), then it will perform all the functions that tradition performs, and more, insofar as now buddhahood has been installed in all (readers) and offered as an available reality in exchange for accepting some rather easy terms.

GIVING BIRTH TO ONESELF

The seventh analogy of the pregnant woman raises equally interesting issues:[29]

> Again, good sons, it is just like a poor, stingy, ugly woman, despised by everyone, who nonetheless conceived an aristocratic son *(guizi),* who would become a World Monarch ruling over all under the four heavens. This person [the mother] doesn't know the course of events and therefore always is self-debasing, thinking of her lowly son. Just like this, good sons, the Tathāgata perceives that all sentient beings, spin in life and death, receiving all sorts of poisonous sufferings, and yet their bodies have within them the hidden treasure of the Tathāgata *(rulai baocang).* Like this woman, they aren't aware of it. Thus the Tathāgata widely preaches dharma, telling good sons not to be self-despising, saying, "You all have within your bodies the buddha nature *(foxing)* and if you would strive to eradicate all your faults and evils *(guoye),* then you will receive the titles of 'bodhisattva' and 'World Honored One.' " Thus it is that I convert, lead, and save limitless sentient beings.

This example takes us closer to father-son issues in several obvious ways, yet there are some details that warrant careful reflection. First, it seems that the reader is to identify with both the woman and the son. The reader's identification with the woman is clear in that both are derided for false identifications and lack of knowledge—both need to learn about this other being within. Like the mother who is self-debasing on account of misrecognizing her son as lowly, the reader qua sentient being is spinning in cyclic existence because he does not know that he has another being within him. But then the narrative requires the reader to reject this initial identification with the mother in order to be just the son, the one with value, identity, and power. However, as usual with a dialectical movement, the process of identification only works with both halves of the dialectic (mother and son) maintained at some level, and this takes us back to the discussion of getting the reader to try to step inside one part of a prior whole and take that part to be the whole. Thus this analogy, the only one of the eight that tries to map

29. T.16.459a.7.

internal buddhahood on to human identity, requires two full persons, one who needs to learn of the reality of the internal being and the internal being who arguably has to learn to forget being part of his mother, actually, not just forget but turn to hate her, since his mother is presented as so unattractive.

The issue of renouncing the mother is rich in itself but doubly so since there is no clear father onstage to claim the child. Assuming patrilineal succession of kingship, as one should in India, the son is the son of the king, and this aristocratic origin is marked in the character *gui,* which usually means, noble, expensive, or aristocratic. Thus, though both the son and the mother are in ignorance about the son's destiny, and by implication, his origin, the narrative gives us a reliable vision of his identity, for the narrator is the one who knows that which is predictive of his being and his legitimate titles. Similarly, the reader learns from the Buddha qua narrator that he has within him the buddha nature, or better, the buddha mark *(foxing),* and thus he presumably is to conclude that he is a son of the buddha with a specific buddha-future ahead of him, provided that he works at eradicating "all faults and evils."

One obvious problem in this analogy is that this mapping requires the reader to birth himself to get at the being who carries the mark of the father. Yet the action required by the narrative that will effect this "birth" is the eradication of all his "faults and evils," and it is in this act of expulsion that he will win the title of son-to-be-the-father, "Bodhisattva," or even the name of the father, "World Honored One." Thus the son carrying the mark of the father that qualifies him to adopt other titles of sameness with the father is manifest in the joint action of eradicating evil and renouncing the mother. The disappearance of the mother in this reclamation of identity is clear simply in her disappearance from the narrative once the son gains sameness with the father, but more poignantly she is homologized to the faults and evils that the son-reader has to get rid of, and certainly her base character and ugliness makes that conjunction quite apposite. In short, the analogy requires the son to expel the mother in the birthing of himself.

But what of her disappearance? If she is homologized to the body of afflictions that cover the son, then in essence she is flesh, samsara, desire, pollution, and so on, and yet she is crucial to the production of the son, and it is just this part of the dialectic between purity and impurity that the analogy cannot admit; for if it did, the mother and impurity in general would appear to be the real progenitors of paternal being and purity. Thus in the text's construction of the production of the pure son, purity is generated by the joint action of excluding the polluting mother and appropriating her reproductive functions so that the son appears to be born already defined by his paternal connections—all of which escape the mother's input and knowledge. In fact, it is just in escaping her input—her ugliness and lowliness—that he can in fact become the opposite: the king.

Pushing the analysis a step further, we ought to say that this analogy of the impure mother and pure perfect son portrays the fundamental ideology behind patriarchy: sons can be made by fathers and then given the fathers' names through the complete suppression of the detour through women. This analogy suggests that the sameness of the internal buddha is never touched or polluted by its encasing afflictions qua base mother. Moreover, this dormant sameness can be recovered from its polluting encasing, and when it is, it is rightfully called son-of-the-father, or same-as-the-father. It is not surprising, then, that the analogy begins with a woman with no name and ends with a father figure explaining how the son gets a name like the father's. Similarly, we discover that it is the narrator, before, during, and after the pregnancy, that knows the destiny of the son, and thus arguably the narrative is the father, the one who, with a view into the causality behind the appearance of the son, can reclaim this next generation as his and pass on his name.

The irony, though, is that the entire project only works if the reader plays the role of the mother long enough for the narrative to engender faith in the presence of a version of the father within the reader. Arguably, then, the narrative impregnates the reader by showing him this example of the ignorant pregnant woman. Thus it is in the acceptance of the narrative about the reader's likeness to the pregnant woman that the reader is moved from being the mother to being the son and finally to being the father. This final moment of being the father ought to give us pause and in fact lead to the rather unavoidable perspective that actually, though one is to identify with the mother, and son in this sequence, the very act of reading has located one "behind the eyes" of the Buddha-father.

THE AGONY OF ANALOGIES AND THE NATURE OF CULTURE

It seems that none of the analogies works very well. Among the reasons for this mismatch, we might be right in assuming that this failure in the text is not really due to a lack of imagination on the part of the author but rather to the fact that there is really nothing in "nature" that could be found to perfectly match an explanation of identity and being. The reason for this impasse seems to be that identity, in just about whatever form it takes, seems to involve a series of negations, transcendences, and fetishistic formats that do not seem to be part of noncultural realities.

Without digressing too far into the structural problems involved in finding noncultural analogies for identity, and its purification, it is worth considering the way that culture is always constituted with reference to what is supposedly not-itself. (For simplicity's sake, I will call not-culture "nature," though many other terms are used by other cultures.) Structurally, this formation means that culture appears on two levels of the discourse as it cre-

ates its own sphere to inhabit, against its opposite ("nature") that it also creates, even as it is the signifier above both those levels, creating those two lower levels and their lines of contact. As many others have argued, "nature," then, is ironically not natural but rather a culturally constructed antipode set up to serve as a "dummy" for its supposed opposite. The benefit of thinking about these structural problems is that it sheds light on the just-mentioned problem of why there is nothing in the culturally constructed category "nature" that can explain "culture." In short, given that culture, by creating and manipulating the concept of nature, is both the articulation of itself within a system of difference and that entire system of difference, there is no way that nature can quite literally come up to its level.

Of particular interest in this play of culture and "nature" is the way a cultural system attempts to "naturalize" itself by making "little" culture (on the lower, oppositional level next to "nature") appear as an effect of "nature," thereby rendering the establishment of culture innocent, unavoidable, universal, and, of course, natural. What is involved in this maneuver is that dubious gesture of reaching over the line of the culturally constructed split between culture and "nature" to appropriate the supposedly innocent and unmotivated aspects of not-culture for the very purpose of purifying and legitimizing culture. This project could be schematized by a circle cut in two, the right side being "nature," the left side (little) "culture," with the whole circle being Culture, which denies its relation to the construction of either culture or nature and, instead, ironically produces rhetoric that founds itself on the "nature" half of the circle. I argue below that it is in this vein that the natural metaphors work to establish the internal buddha.[30]

DEEP DOWN, WE'RE ALL SUPERFICIAL[31]

Thinking about relying on noncultural, even insentient items to explain the perfect subject, the internal buddha, leads to a number of other questions about the rhetoric of the internal buddha. First, one might wonder if this internal buddha might not need an inside for itself. That is, as a full-fledged subject, wouldn't the internal buddha, too, need an internal sphere of content and cogitation behind the line that distinguishes it from the normal subject? Once we ask this kind of question it becomes clear that the text's eagerness to represent paternal presence as a physical kind of reality entails a set of uncomfortable consequences that come with any attempt to substantialize the subject and to read analogies-for-the-subject in a literal fash-

30. This perspective is equally useful for reading the prominent nature motifs in Chan literature.

31. Though this might be a stock phrase, I believe that in fact I "borrowed" it from Elvis Costello's liner notes to an album that I can no longer locate.

ion. Put in these terms, isn't the problem here that the text is trying to give the reading-subject a substantialized version of patriarchal sameness, making the link between the universal truth-father and the reading-son a material, always already established reality? Compared to the way the *Lotus Sūtra* simply spoke of sonship that could be rewon through correct identification with the narrative, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* has made the presence of the father fully visible as a Thing waiting to occupy the totality of the subject once not-it has been removed.

Of course, many religious systems have a tendency to substantialize the final, purified subject, but I would speculate that two other discourse forces are at work here. First, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* has been intent on making a physical buddha, the historical Buddha, appear fully present in and through the rhetoric of the text. That the text asks for a similar reading effect on the "inside" of the reader, then, seems directly parallel. In either case, the text's language seeks its closure and ground in purveying a substantially present physical buddha who will hold the language of the text together and make that language an effect of the Real, and not the other way around. In fact, in terms of the quid pro quo arrangement that the text has established, the text is simply playing fair: if you, the reader, give this literary presentation of the Buddha a real buddha-body, the text is prepared to give you the same back—your own internal buddha who, though made of words, will, in conjunction with his external doppelgänger, take the next step of gaining the fuller reality of being physically present and fully visible to the observing Buddha that one created on the "outside."

Second, given that other Mahāyāna texts such as the *Diamond Sūtra* were intent on substantializing their textuality in order to make the text either like a stūpa or like the Buddha, we should ask if the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* might not be partaking in a similar gesture: isn't it, too, a form of Mahāyāna rhetoric intent on making its rhetoric morph into the physical presence of the Buddha, be it a live or a cremated version? In the final passage before the stock ending there are lines that suggest both that the text is to be worshiped as a buddha and that having the text turns one into a buddha. The Buddha explains the importance of the text for producing buddhas:[32]

> At the time when I was seeking enlightenment, I had previously, with Lion Banner Buddha, already received this sūtra, and I had practiced in accordance with its teachings. And, due to these good roots [of merit], I quickly attained the buddha way *(cheng fodao)* in this lifetime. Therefore, all bodhisattvas should uphold and explain this sūtra, and, having heard it, if they should practice accordingly, they will attain buddha[hood] like I did. *Those who take up this sūtra should venerate (li) it as though it were the World Honored One.* And, whoever obtains this sūtra should be called King of Buddhist Dharma.

32. T.16.460b.10; emphasis added.

> Whoever protects it for all those in the world will be admired by all the buddhas. And whoever upholds this sūtra, will be called Dharma King and will be the Eye of the World who should be praised as though he were a World Honored One.

Obviously, here at the end of the text, the author is piling up promises about the power of the text to produce buddhahood and, in doing so, develops three lines of efficacy. First, he has the Buddha explain the text as the cause for his own buddhahood. Second, he has the Buddha explicitly command bodhisattvas to venerate the text as though it were a buddha. And, third, the Buddha explains that owning the text turns one into something like a buddha since that person should be called by the Buddha's epithets—World Honored One, Eye of the World, and Dharma King—and should be praised by others as though he were a World Honored One. In short, like the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* this text is trying to create a buddha who pours buddhahood right back into the text as object, for it is that which makes buddhas and which ought to be venerated as a buddha. Given the equation of text and buddha here at the conclusion, I think we need to consider that substantializing the internal buddha rhymes with substantializing the text's rhetoric into a buddha.

Consequently, the text has sought to turn language into buddha-presence in three spheres: the narrative is to turn into a speaking buddha, this speaking buddha speaks of the subject's buddha beyond normal subjectivity, and then concludes by explaining that all this language of internal and external buddhas, too, is buddhalike and ought to be treated as such. Without pushing too hard on this cycle of substantialized rhetorical buddhas, I would suggest that in trying to establish the connection between father and son, and equally important, between past and present, the text has turned itself into a timeless father that can produce fathers and sons wherever and whenever its rhetoric is taken to be *of* the father in a sense that has a tendency to claim the right to essentialize and thingify father, son, and the rhetoric that holds them together.

The upshot of organizing a discourse for truth, purity, and fatherhood in this manner is that desire for this kind of presence ends up falling on the "surface" of fatherhood and not on some subjective interior. Obviously, the bulk of this text is about the surface of buddhahood; both the internal buddha and the external Buddha are left undescribed in terms of their interior subjective modes. Similarly, except for the complicated mother-son analogy, none of the other analogies for the internal buddha implies a thinking version of the internal buddha. Too, there is a tendency in the text to celebrate the surface of the recovered objects that are metaphorized to the internal buddha. With the emphasis on statues, gold, wheat kernels, and so forth, it seems that content *inside* the internal buddha is going to be

sacrificed in the text's program for inciting desire for this subject within the subject.

Another side of this question regarding the subjecthood of the internal buddha unavoidably introduces an infinite regress, since to find content within the buddha-subject would inadvertently produce another level of objectness—what the internal buddha was thinking of, and so on—in the place that was supposed to be pure subject. In lieu of opening up a door onto infinite regress, the text seems content to present the internal buddha as a desirable object instead of a working subject, and hence we are given a pure subject that is technically superficial and iconic instead of being dialectical and interactive, as one would expect of a subject. At the very least it is clear that the text never invites the reader to climb into the subject-position of the internal buddha. Instead the text focuses on generating desire for a gesture of separation that reveals a statuesque purity—the flowers pealed away from the glowing buddhas, the gold from shit, the statue from the burned mold. Presumably, these gestures are to excite interest in the project of removing a part of subjectivity to reveal a better version of "itself." Clearly, then, in this model of getting at the internal buddha, exclusion, negation, and purification are unavoidable, and these dialectical elements have particular import given their contrast with the static and nondialectical nature associated with the internal buddha.

Standing back from these complicated issues regarding the representation of the perfect subject to the reading subject, we might say that the text structures a fantasy in which we have a dialectical mode of fetishizing subjectivity in the form of an object that is set strictly apart from working subjectivity and all dialectical engagements. Thus this fantasy for closure around fixed purity wishes more than anything to produce a final place to stop being dialectical, even though purity is itself unavoidably dialectical—not only is purity a function of its opposite, impurity, but purity can only be defined through negation. Desiring this frozen end point, of course, fits well with the basic Buddhist fantasy that, from the beginning, imagined the possibility of a subject that was not only completely cut away from all other being—body, history, karma—but also completely untouched by what it received in the cognition process. And given this aim to end dialectical engagement in a zone of final purity, there may be good reasons to think that this perfect internal subject is dead—truly a statue.

The lurking problem here, and it is maybe one of the more interesting "eternal problems," is that any attempt to articulate the subject must always run up against the impossible combination of functioning-subject and subject-as-object. This is not simply because the subject must be a "something" to be thought of when thinking is thinking about itself but also because isolating the subject in this manner is, like the culture-nature problem, the effect of a prior negation. As soon as one has spoken of a subject one has

extracted consciousness from the consciousness-of-something and from its supporting matrix of the body and whatever other life forces propel thinking. Thus, any discussion of the subject as an item cut away from a matrix is forever bound to its opposite, not just for its dialectically prior moment of exclusion, but because it prides itself on being the only extant "thing" that has the power to make such a claim of difference from nonsubject. Put otherwise, consciousness is the only thing that bothers telling itself that it is different from everything else, and this claim alone, despite its ever shaky epistemological and ontological grounds, is itself what makes consciousness different from everything else. In this perspective, consciousness is not so much the extraction of itself from things but itself from itself, an action, as we have seen, that is fundamental to the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*.

THE PROMISE

Right after the eight analogies, the text offers the reader an extravagant promise regarding the power of this text, the power of taking this text as truth, or perhaps we can even say, the power of taking this text inside as the guide for understanding what is inside one *already:*[33]

> At this time the World Honored One said to Bodhisattva Vajramati, the Great Being, "If there were a renunciant *(chujia)* or a layperson, a good son or good daughter, who accepted, upheld, recited, copied *(shuxie)*, worshipped *(gongyang)*, and widely explained this *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* to others, then the merit that they would gain would be without limit."

This promise is not left simply as a great provocation to accept and uphold this doctrine, for like so many other Mahāyāna texts, it invites the reader to become the teacher or purveyor of this text. In other words, the text promises that the value of the text comes to fruition when the reader takes the text not just inside himself but also into the space of the Other. Thus the text presents itself as a great value producer that must be cranked forward in time as the reader becomes the conduit to the next reader. Ironically, then, though the text is dedicated to explaining the internal buddha that exists beyond time and being at the very core of the reader's subjectivity, value is promised in transacting, outward, just that doctrine about internal realities. Consequently, the text on the internal buddha moves in a way exactly contrary to the fixity and silence of the internal buddha. Like the various forms of vision that it creates within its borders, the text affirms that it is a thing that can cross boundaries to verify the full reality of what is on either side of the boundary between complete and incomplete subjects.

In this promise-moment in the narrative, for the very first time women

33. T.16.459b.13.

are spoken to. Previously, only "good sons" were addressed and women were not part of the discourse in any noticeable way. So why, we might ask, are women drawn into the equation just at this point of defining the sūtra's power to make merit? Apparently the text wants its outreach program to be as wide as possible, and thus what had been an apparently monastic conversation is now explicitly opened to both renunciants and laity. Thus, though the text is based on men speaking to one another in apparently monastic modes, this setting shifts when the text turns outward to seduce readers into working for its propagation. Of course, including women here does not overcome the basic orientation of the text, which is intent on turning the reader into a subject colonized by a buddha, with both figures presumably being male. How women were to understand this internal maleness is not explained in the text, though I should add that *The Śrīmālā Sūtra (Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanāda Sūtra)* presents the princess Śrīmālā as the main interlocutor in a discourse that nonetheless ends up explaining how to be a "real son of the Buddha."[34]

A rather long analogy follows that explains the scope of the merit gained from trusting and accepting the text. We learn that if a Buddhist engaged in incredibly elaborate offerings, along with ardent practices of cultivation, *samādhi,* and the planting of roots of merit, and so forth, for interminable lengths of time—as many eons as sands in the Ganges—he would never come close to winning the merit that one wins from accepting this sūtra. In fact, the sūtra narrows worship and devotion to itself down to "just one analogy *(biyu),*" saying that even such a small piece of this text will generate astronomically more merit that those other presumably prosaic Buddhist practices, which had already been explained as astronomically effective in their own right.[35] If we are to take this rhetoric at its word, then the text upholds the eight analogies as the most precious part of itself: just pick an analogy for the internal buddha, traffic in it, and you will be the richest Buddhist in the universe.

This seemingly outrageous claim comes with a telling rider: the narrative-Buddha clarifies that the merit one makes in this manner of taking up an analogy is so great that even an analogy for counting cannot reach it. Thus we get a double statement of the transcendence of analogies. On the first level, these analogies simply make merit and are worth more than anything else in the world. Thus trafficking in them transcends the normal modes of Buddhist practice, which had already been set up as infinitely great. On the second level, the power of trafficking in analogies is said to surpass its competition to the extent that even an analogy could not be found to express the gap. All this implies that analogies are things known to cross over

34. T.12.222c.8.
35. T.16.459b.26.

infinite spaces or quantities, and failure to find an analogy to quantify this gap in this case is simply proof of the hyper-infinity produced by the first level of analogies.

The power of analogies is reinforced in the following verse, which restates this section: "Smart ones who hear this sūtra and are able to uphold even one analogy and explain it to another person, their merit will be so much greater than that of those [who practice other forms of Buddhism just listed: giving, magical powers, etc.], that the counting *(suanshu)* of it could not even be reached with analogies *(biyu)*."[36] Clearly, then, analogies are capital for this text, for the intelligent, and for those who want to reach places where even the transcendence of analogies cannot go. Moreover, the verse promises: "Those sentient beings who rely on this [text, analogy] will quickly attain this Supreme Way *(su cheng wushang dao)*. Bodhisattvas think carefully about this very profound hidden buddha, know that all sentient beings have it, and quickly *(ji)* attained the Supreme Way." Given that the transcendence implied in analogies is rated as such a valuable commodity, it should come as no shock that this text and its analogies can also be promised as tickets to the highest level, to be achieved in a short amount of time. Just as analogies link here and there on the referential level, so too do they "actually" link here and there in a soteriological sense, for they convey believers from here to there in both senses of the word *convey*.

THE TEXT'S HISTORY OF ITSELF AND ITS REPEATING ACTORS

The promise of the text's powers and potentials for moving "smart ones" along the path leads into the final section, which ironically is about a past failure. This concluding section explains the text's history and the history of the speakers in the text, most notably the Buddha and Vajramati. Though some of this section seems indebted to strategies employed in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is distinctive in playing up buddha land motifs even as it uses the trope of light, like the *Lotus Sūtra,* to express a higher form of expressing the content of this text.

In brief, we are told that eons and eons ago, there was a buddha named Always Emitting Light King Tathāgata *(Changfang guangming wang rulai),* and, as his name suggests, he was especially famous for his emission of light. In particular:[37]

> This buddha, in the course of his progress on the bodhisattva path, [in his last lifetime], when his spirit descended into his mother's womb, he continually emitted light from within her and it penetrated the ten directions as far as one

36. T.16.459c.17; Grosnick's translation, though basically accurate, does not reveal the role that analogies are playing in creating the image of uncountability.

37. T.16.459c.26.

> thousand buddha fields away, [touching] even their smallest particles. And, whatever sentient beings were touched by this light, all would feel happy, their afflictions would be extinguished, their bodies and powers would all become complete, and their intellects *(nianzhi)* would be complete and they would achieve limitless eloquence. If a hell-being or a hungry ghost or an animal or King Yama, or an *asura* saw this light, each would be liberated from the evil paths and be reborn in the heavenly or human realms. If humans or gods saw this light, they would attain irreversibility with regard to the Supreme Path and they would have the five clairvoyant powers.

This passage presents an image of how in some more perfect past, teaching was effected by light, not by words and certainly not by texts. In this zone of past perfection, language is absolved of its work, and the passive reception, in the eye, of the light of this buddha-to-be consummated all the religious work expected in texts and Buddhism in general. The substitution of light for language leads into a discussion of how this light also transformed mundane worlds into buddha lands made of heavenly glass and pure gold. As in the buddha land of the shorter *Land of Bliss Sūtra,* the most noticeable function that is performed in a buddha land is the magical production of dharma.[38] Here in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* as in the *Land of Bliss Sūtra,* Buddhist teachings are produced naturally and the reception of those teachings is automatic and total:[39]

> There are various kinds of jeweled trees with flowers and fruit in abundance, fragrant in marvelous manners and which, when a subtle winds blows through them, produce a subtle sound of dharma, which articulates the Three Jewels [of Buddhism], bodhisattva merits, the power of good roots, the path of awakening, meditation, and liberation. Those sentient beings who hear this, all attain happiness with the dharma, solidity [in their practice/faith] and forever leave the evil realms of rebirth.

This explanation of "automatic dharma" is followed by a more specialized explanation of the powers of the bodhisattva's light, which lasted after his death, as his relics glowed. It is evident here that light is the vehicle of choice that touches all beings, giving them pleasure and Buddhism directly, and transforming their environments such that when language again reappears it is in the guise of wind through the jeweled trees; it again automatically achieves its effects in the "listener," just as the light did. In short, in this distant and fantastic zone of the Buddha Always Emitting Light, light did

38. For a discussion of communication in the *Land of Bliss Sūtra*'s version of the Pure Land, see my "Of Texts and Tongues: Orality, Textuality, and Pleasure in the Land of Bliss," forthcoming.

39. T.16.460a.6. For a comparable passage, see *The Land of Bliss Sūtra,* trans. Luis O. Gómez, pp. 17–18.

what language now seeks to do, with the obvious twist that in fact language is seeking to be lightlike by invoking this light analogy for itself. Language obviously is not light, but oddly enough language becomes more lightlike, at least in its mode of transmission, by creating just this distant image of its desired "self" and then appearing here as a feeble doppelgänger of that perfect form of paternal transmission accomplished by light alone. In other words, just as various kinds of seeing stand in for reading and imagining in the front part of the text, here light is replacing language as the model for touching, pleasing, and seducing the Other, and with that substitution in place, this language just might have that effect.

The final details of this buddha-of-light are equally interesting. Right after he achieved complete enlightenment he taught the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* to two billion bodhisattvas, a teaching that took fifty eons but succeeded in causing all but four of the two billion bodhisattvas to achieve buddhahood. Thus at this final juncture the text is recounting its own powerful role in turning bodhisattvas into buddhas, and presumably thereby claiming to be their parental cause, as we have seen in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra.* According to this history of itself, buddhas as wonderful as this buddha of light relied on just this text to produce full copies of themselves in nearly limitless quantities.

In this audience from the distant past there were several figures of note. The first one was a bodhisattva named Limitless Light *(Wubian guang)* who asked for this teaching, and it turns out that this bodhisattva became the Buddha Śākyamuni. Hence, of the two billion bodhisattvas that achieved enlightenment, one was the buddha of our universe, the very one again teaching the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* with the light in his previous name presumably representing just this success in passing on the sameness of identity. This image of transmission is, of course, supported by the fact that whereas in the past he asked for the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* this time he himself is giving it, thereby pointing to another level of conservation of identity, meaning, and textuality. Despite the flow of eons, nothing changes, and clearly there is no anxiety over maintaining continuity and "essence" in the tradition. As the buddhas turn bodhisattvas into replicas of themselves, these replicas mirror their progenitors by mastering the single text—the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*—that turns bodhisattvas into buddhas. Facing the full reflexivity of this history of the reproductive powers of the text, we have to conclude that father and son successfully repeat themselves by repeating the text that explains their successful repetition.

In the text's history of itself, four other figures are mentioned by name: Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Mahāstāmaprāpta, and of course Vajramati, all of whom received the teaching but did not become buddhas. Like Maitreya's laziness in the *Lotus Sūtra,* Vajramati's past failure in a group so otherwise stupendously successful is a key juncture for the text. It seems three things are

achieved in this trope. First, a degree of continuity is established. The reason Vajramati was the interlocutor in this account is that he had been a recipient of this teaching in the past. In a word, Vajramati's past failure allows this teaching to rhyme with the former teaching, making his failure ironically productive of what should save us. Second, like the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra,* as the text narrates itself, it has legitimized itself and made the actors onstage not the creations of a current author in India but segments in a long cosmic narrative that supposedly has it own intrinsic rules far beyond what one might attribute to some simple sūtra forger. Third, Vajramati's past failure seems posed to invite the reader into the same position. Might not the reader be just like Vajramati, having heard this discourse in the past and somehow not quite mastered it? In addition to the implicit nostalgia of regaining what he had already "learned" previously, Vajramati's blindness vis-à-vis his past relationship with the text is set up parallel to his and the reader's blindness with regard to their internal buddhas. Both the teachings and the internal buddhas have always been there, and known to have been there by the narrating father, and it is now just a question of the good sons "seeing" both items from the father's point of view and in that act of seeing, getting at their fullest identity in the sense of excavating this internal buddha and winning the names "bodhisattva" and "World Honored One" for themselves.

CONCLUSION

I have already drawn out most of my conclusions from the above material, so I leave this chapter with one simple perspective. In the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* there is no historical figure other than the Buddha. Everyone else, as presented in the long list of bodhisattvas, is unrecognizable, and their connection to India or to "real" time is essentially unimportant. Thus the reader's reaction to this doctrine is guided by watching these untraditional and unhistorical figures learn about their internal buddhas as the external Buddha teaches via the various magic shows and analogies. By the end of the text, the reader's relationship to this doctrine condenses around two actions, which concern the text itself and no other institution or historical person or school: (1) believe this text and its analogies in order to win limitless merit and access to one's own internal buddha, and (2) pass the text on to others to again gain limitless merit and to reenact the cosmic drama described in the text whereby buddhas are produced through the transmission of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra.* Besides pushing the reader to treat the text with these desires and expectations, there is no particular school or set of individuals that the reader is invited to patronize or otherwise engage. In short, the text keeps its propaganda on the level of text-reader relations with absolutely no "real" world implications for Buddhist politics other than putting the text at the center of tradition.

6

Vimalakīrti, or Why Bad Boys Finish First

In a sense, language is always about itself: in interior monologues, just as in dialogue, there are no "thoughts": there is only the speech that speech elicits.
MERLEAU-PONTY, *La prose du monde*

OVERVIEW AND THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

Of the texts selected in this survey of early Mahāyāna literature, the *Vimalakīrti* presents the brashest example of textual patriarchy overcoming prior forms of Buddhism. In an unusually hard-hitting narrative, the action produces the image of perfect tradition condensed in the figure of Vimalakīrti who, in a series of set pieces, humiliates old-style Buddhists and their uncomplicated beliefs and practices. In the wake of this moral and philosophic devastation, the narrative resolves with the Buddha explaining that the book form of this narrative of humiliation and overcoming should be revered as the font and totality of real Buddhism. In an equally conservative moment in the closing section, the Buddha reestablishes the flow of authority by conferring the text on Maitreya, thereby fully regathering tradition and setting it within its most familiar conduits, despite the havoc that the text wrought on tradition throughout the earlier phases of the narrative.

Of course, this narrative sequence has much in common with the three texts considered in the preceding chapters, and in fact the author seems particularly influenced by several elements and episodes from the *Lotus Sūtra*. At the end of this chapter and in the final chapter, I offer some reflections on what is implied by Mahāyāna authors rewriting each other's attempts to make texts into tradition. For now, suffice it to say that this kind of literary borrowing suggests a complex literary culture in which writers were reading each other in just the way that these texts hoped *not* to be read, that is, as literature. Thus, instead of seeking in these works the pristine orality of the historical Buddha and the totality of tradition that these texts proffered, writers read against the grain looking to understand how these works formulated seductive reading experiences, and all in order to

write new seductive narratives and develop alternative motifs that implicitly negated the value of the texts they had worked from.

Thus when we try to conceptualize the origins of Mahāyāna literature, we need to imagine a complex ongoing reinvention of tradition that, in part, was authored by figures who not only read, for instance, the *Lotus Sūtra* and dodged its centripetal pull, but then turned on it to cannibalize it for new writing projects. In short, each of these narratives, insofar as they repeat *and* deny their antecedents, represent a history of writing in which authors sought to do to readers exactly what other texts had at best only partially done to them—seduce them into accepting a Mahāyāna sūtra as the totality of tradition. Presumably, then, even within the Mahāyāna effort to overcome traditional Buddhism there is another track of competition in which each text is silently, yet undeniably, attempting to overcome its textual precedents.

Perhaps even more interesting is the possibility that the very gesture that predominates in these Mahāyāna sūtras—that movement "up" to overcome a prior meaning system by creating a new master signifier—allowed for all sorts of flexibility in how these authors participated in meaning systems. That is, if the fundamental gesture in the sūtras considered so far is one of sublation in which the standard form of tradition still stands even as it is turbocharged via rhetorics of negation, then isn't that sublation structure also visible in the space between reading a Mahāyāna sūtra and trying to write an improved one? In both cases, the defining structures of the prior form—be it the standard contours of traditional Buddhism or the narrative arc of an antecedent sūtra—are replicated, consumed, and, after a fashion, abused, even though it is just through such a process of consumption that tradition moves forward.

Of course, here we again have reason to speak of the metastasis of patriarchy since we cannot avoid the likelihood that these patriarchal systems were replicated by those who maintained a rather ambivalent attitude toward paternal figures, be they lodged in tradition or in prior narratives. Or more precisely, in the case of these sūtras, "better," or at least, more accessible versions of the father were written by rather ironic and complicated sons who had learned where fathers come from—from narratives of seduction whose linguistic matrixes disappear into truth and the patriarchal essences they create. And yet this very discovery was also the basis of wishing to pass on yet another version of the father. Though such an ironic vision of the Mahāyāna tradition has been far from our imagination, still I think it ends up being the most defendable position for understanding the evolution of rewriting textual fathers. And, unlike most models for imagining the re-creation of Buddhist traditions, which tend to treat cultural innovators as basically unironic and beholden to tradition, the evidence here suggests much more agency, cleverness, and capacity for "double vision" in the

reworking of tradition through reconstructing and repositioning master signifiers and the seductive matrixes that support them.

APPLES AND ELEPHANTS: A REVIEW OF AN EARLIER READING OF THE *VIMALAKĪRTI*

Until the recent discovery of a Sanskrit manuscript of the *Vimalakīrti* in Japan, the work survived only in Chinese and Tibetan translations, save for a few stray quotes in later Indian compendiums and treatises.[1] In fact, there are good reasons for thinking that the later forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in India and Tibet, had little use for this text. On the other hand, there were at least six translations of the text into Chinese, along with numerous commentaries, attesting to a deep and abiding Chinese interest in this work. Of these six translations, Kumārajīva's of 406 has been received as the most authoritative over the centuries, and so it is from that text that I am working.

If we are to believe the Chinese translation histories, and they are often misleading, the *Vimalakīrti* was first translated in 188 C.E., suggesting that the text must have been in circulation in India sometime earlier. Hypothesizing that the text was authored near the beginning of the common era, or slightly thereafter, makes good sense, because though the text seems more developed than some of the other early Mahāyāna sūtras, it appears nonetheless to belong to that early phase of Buddhist writing that probably began a century before the common era.

Unlike the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* the *Vimalakīrti* has drawn considerable attention to itself in the twentieth century, and one can find numerous translations of the text into Occidental languages. Though I have only canvassed the French and English presentations of the text, it is clear that a certain style of reading this text has emerged, which, though arguably rather misdirected, has taken hold. For those modern scholars reading the text in Chinese, the dominant trend is to interpret it as a freewheeling, good-humored, populist critique of the Buddhist institution that is of a piece with the Chinese classic, the *Zhuangzi.* In framing the *Vimalakīrti* in this manner, we are asked to believe that despite belonging to very different cultures and eras, the *Vimalakīrti* of first-century India engages in the same irreverent and subversive philosophy as the *Zhuangzi* of fourth-century B.C.E. China.

Burton Watson, who has translated both the *Vimalakīrti* and the *Zhuangzi,* introduces his 1997 translation of the *Vimalakīrti* with a reference to the

1. For a discussion of this discovery, see Jan Nattier's well-balanced account of the treatment of the *Vimalakīrti* in recent Buddhist studies: "The Teaching of *Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa):* Four Translations of the *Vimalakītinirdeśa,*" *Buddhist Literature* 2 (2000): 234–58.

Zhuangzi: "In philosophical depth and brilliance of language it rivals the *Zhuangzi.*" This casual comparison is underscored in the following paragraph when he claims that the *Vimalakīrti* is "a work that in many ways so closely resembles the *Zhuangzi.*"[2] Though apparently confident of this resemblance, Watson does not explore these "many ways," nor does he anywhere develop the logic or viability of this comparison that bounds from the social and political angst of Warring States China to the complex refiguration of Indian Buddhism that began slightly before the beginning of the common era under the title of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Even at first glance, this comparison ought to trouble us; in terms of form, structure, and narrative voicing, one could not find two more different texts. As for the *Zhuangzi,* it appears as a haphazard work, completely underproduced. No one could say that its loose compilation of stories, short essays, and anecdotes is organized to produce a linear, unified reading experience—chapter 1 does not suggest chapters 2, 3, 4, and so on, and they could be reordered with little effect in the reading experience. And the same could be said of the contents of each chapter. The charm and brilliance in the *Zhuangzi* are not on the level of an overarching argument or a progressively developing reading experience. Instead, the *Zhuangzi* is enchanting on the level of its individual pieces: the hilarious talking animals, the insouciant inversion of social expectations, and the disarmingly honest essay-voice that now and again appears between the stories. In fact, the *Zhuangzi* arguably is not a "text" in the formal sense of the word as it shows no internal logic, a fact supported by the way that many new chapters seem to have been inserted around older sections.

The *Vimalakīrti,* in contrast, has a linear plot and a unifying narrative structure. Moreover, actors in the narrative speak of the text and its title, spending considerable time in the final chapters explaining to the reader how the narrative, as textual object, ought to be worshipfully received. Thus, like the prior three sūtras, actors in the narrative explain their relationship to the text, thereby creating a system of autoreference that works to determine the reader's relationship to the text. In fact, and again like the other three texts, the *Vimalakīrti*'s interest in itself even extends to explaining how it is to be copied and reproduced for other readers and what meritorious effects this will have within the Buddhist system of reckoning value. In short, the *Vimalakīrti* is a fully developed text, self-conscious or even hyperconscious of itself as an object within a wider economy of human exchange, and equally articulate about its desired place at the top of various hierarchies in the Buddhist tradition.

Given these pronounced differences between the *Vimalakīrti* and the

2. Burton Watson, trans., *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. ix.

Zhuangzi, Watson's breezy comments are puzzling. What would have led Watson to believe that his position did not need to be developed or defended? The most likely answer is simply that Watson is rehearsing a position that has, for rather unclear reasons, gained a kind of naturalness in our reading of East Asian literature, and thus he felt no obligation to explain the logic or relevancy of this comparison.

As I argue in the rest of this chapter, adopting this Zhuangzian reading of the *Vimalakīrti* effectively blocks a careful assessment of the text in the Indian context, just as it blocks appreciation for the work that went into reinterpreting it in China. On the other hand, close reading the *Vimalakīrti* in light of the arguments developed in the preceding chapters gives us two important advantages: another angle from which to appreciate textual patriarchy in early Mahāyāna rhetoric; and solid footing for reassessing, in a future work, the historical significance of Chan's success in redeploying these various imported rhetorics.

HEROES ON PAPER

Before more closely evaluating the oddness of equating the *Vimalakīrti* with the *Zhuangzi,* let me point out that Watson's comments leave no doubt that sameness between the two texts is found strictly on the level of content. It is the particular passages, the modes of reasoning, the irreverence, the supposed humor, and so on, that warrant putting these two works in the same boat. Evidently, Watson has tacitly decided that texts do not need to be read as literature or placed within specific institutional settings.

In brief, the danger of not reading the *Vimalakīrti* for the plot is a little like noting that in the Gospels, Jesus is presented attacking the traditional Jewish hierarchy of priests and scribes and then assuming that the Gospel authors positioned him to be *completely* against traditional Judaism. A more sensible reading would argue that Jesus as a literary figure is set up to overcome prior Jewish forms of authority by employing reworked elements of just that tradition. Of course, to do this he needs a direct conduit back to the ultimate source of Jewish tradition—God. No surprise, then, that Mark, the earliest Gospel, opens with a narrative description of Jesus' baptism that concludes with the voice from heaven acknowledging Jesus as his son (Mark 1:11), thereby securing a kind of perfect transmission that supports and legitimizes all the damage Jesus will go on to do to traditional Judaism in the rest of the narrative. Once we reposition the figure of Jesus within that narrative process of overcoming tradition based on being more "deeply" traditional than tradition, it is perfectly logical how often Jesus is shown quoting from the Old Testament, or that in the Gospel of Mark he is three times called "Rabbi" and attached to the House of David (10:47; 11:10), not to mention the secret scene on the "high mountain apart" where something

like a virtual lineage running from Moses to Elijah to Jesus is concretized in the vision granted to Peter and James (9:2). In short, reading the synoptic Gospels without a sensitivity for dialectical engagements between tradition, "higher" patriarchy, and the reinvention of a supposedly deeper and more authentic kind of tradition is to invite darkness just where we need light.

I risk this hasty Buddhist-Christian comparison because it seems to me that Watson has chosen to read the *Vimalakīrti* in a manner that reflects two millennia of reading the Gospels. He has adopted a hermeneutic that focuses on Vimalakīrti the man and his message, instead of the literary framing that makes the man and the message worth focusing on. Against this kind of unliterary reading, I want to reflect on how antinomian rhetoric works in the full matrix of the *Vimalakīrti* narrative, not only to argue for a better reading, but also to suggest that reading to get at the heroes-in-literature, apart from their narrative housing, meshes altogether too neatly with the West's cultural heritage of ingesting "revolutionary" rhetorics with gusto and with little regard for the finer literary machinery that supports those rhetorics.

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY: SOME SERIOUS IRONY IN THE *VIMALAKĪRTI*

To begin such a reading, let me clarify that there is, in fact, plenty of antinomianism in the *Vimalakīrti,* and Vimalakīrti as a figure in the drama uses rather dangerous-sounding rhetoric to humiliate the standard pantheon of Buddhist heroes as he hollows out the validity of a range of Buddhist beliefs and practices, from meditation to begging for alms. However, these acts of negation are not presented for the reader's simple and straightforward edification. Instead, they proceed according to a steady arc of reordering authority—a progression that works like a plot, that is. Thus these acts belong to a dialectic that maintains itself throughout different zones of narrative activity, including the antinomian phase, and finally recuperates itself at the end of the narrative where authority appears in an enhanced form, suitable to reconstruct both tradition and legitimate Buddhist identity within tradition.

In the plot of the *Vimalakīrti* there are four distinct elements that never allow antinomianism to slide away from the tasks that the author expects of it. First, the sanctity of the Buddha as an all-knowing figure is never directly questioned; Vimalakīrti's cutting analyses and insulting questions are never turned on the Buddha who, from beginning to end, holds the text together. Thus Vimalakīrti's negativity and antinomianism are formally encapsulated and domesticated by the Buddha's unassaulted authority and perduring presence. Also, from beginning to end, Vimalakīrti is made submissive to the Buddha even though a close reading of Vimalakīrti's feigned sickness in chapters 2 and 3 reveals that the author implicitly demotes the Buddha when he involves him, as a believing participant, in a

scheme that Vimalakīrti has concocted to lure the totality of tradition to his room where he plans to convert them to "real" Buddhism.

Second, the triumphalism of Vimalakīrti's message is left uninflected, with no winks or snickering along the way that would let you laugh at him. Even though Vimalakīrti is introduced as the impossible combination of all sorts of dualities, in terms of authority he is a completely monochromatic figure: he never stumbles in his oration, never reverses himself, and never allows for the impression that he's been had. And, contrary to what is often said of his character, I do not think he is playful, and in fact it is hard to see what is funny about anything he says. Certainly no one laughs in the text. Instead there are three dominant emotions spoken of in the text: (1) joy in devotion to the Buddha and the *Vimalakīrti*; (2) shame at failing to live up to the higher demands that Vimalakīrti asserts are sine qua non for being a real Buddhist; and (3) dissatisfaction with old-style tradition. Arguably just the right combination of these emotions is what the text is seeking to generate in the reader.

Third, as mentioned above, the text is especially preoccupied with itself as an object. The Buddha and others speak of the text as the sole means for obtaining truth and value in the cosmos. In fact, by the end, the Buddha explains that the text is something like his double, suggesting that the whole work of the text ought to be interpreted as another example of the "King's Two Bodies."[3] In the course of the following discussions, I argue that just as with the sūtras considered in previous chapters, this doubling of authority actually is the primary task of the text: to produce a new form of the Buddha and a new form of authentic tradition that is housed in the text itself.

Fourth, in the final three chapters, the tough-talking Vimalakīrti disappears and the narrative shifts levels as the Buddha is shown transmitting the story of Vimalakīrti as a text to Maitreya, the coming buddha, in a gesture that is clearly performed to fully domesticate this antinomian language. There is no question, then, that this is a story with a very "happy ending" since everything resolves perfectly, and the reader is left holding the key to recovering perfection and the totality of Buddhism.

That the narrative of Vimalakīrti concludes with the Buddha's investiture of Maitreya with the *Vimalakīrti* text itself is curious as earlier in the narrative Maitreya had been philosophically abused by Vimalakīrti and yet now regains his buddha-status by accepting the text that includes within it his own humiliation. Assuredly this is a complicated gesture worth careful reflection, but by noting how Maitreya first takes a fall and then regains his legitimate status as the coming buddha by accepting the very narrative of

3. For this valuable perspective on doubling authority to maintain its presence through death, see Ernest H. Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

that fall, we clearly are not far from recognizing the basic dynamics that drive the text. In fact, quite parallel to the plot structures at work in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* Maitreya's loss and recovery of authenticity seem to serve as a template for the reader who loses his secure position in old-style Buddhism as he reads but gains a higher authenticity once he confirms that the text has the right to reorder tradition, identity, and authenticity in these ways.

THE FULL TEXTUAL JACKET IN A READING OF THE *VIMALAKĪRTI*

The *Vimalakīrti,* as we have it translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva, has fourteen chapters that move through five identifiable zones of activity:

1. The introduction of the Buddha, Śāriputra, and others at a teaching site in Vaiśālī, where the Buddha performs a miracle that negates the validity of traditional Buddhism;
2. the introduction and description of Vimalakīrti in another part of town where he has, unlike the Buddha, actually been instructing beings in "valid," Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism;
3. a string of formalized confessions in which the Buddha's principal disciples resist visiting Vimalakīrti, explaining to the Buddha their past failures in the face of Vimalakīrti's discourses;
4. a move to a magical teaching session, not attended by the Buddha,[4] at Vimalakīrti's house where Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī exchange a series of "authentic" teachings; in between these discussions Śāriputra is thrice scolded and unmanned by an unnamed goddess;
5. the return of the group to the Buddha's original teaching site for more discussion and closure, with the Buddha explaining how the textual version of this narrative should be transmitted after his death.

Not surprisingly in a text dedicated to reordering authority, these five narrative zones create and negotiate five kinds of authority. In order of appearance, there is the authority of the Buddha, old-style tradition, Mañjuśrī, Vimalakīrti, and the text itself. Clearly, just in terms of the flow of staged authority, the end goal of the text is to move authority from the Buddha to the text via the mediating figure of Vimalakīrti. To give a more detailed account of this flow of authority throughout the narrative, I have broken the narrative into six stages that roughly match the five zones of activity listed above.

4. There is some question about whether Ānanda attends. He, like the other traditional figures, recounts his failure in the face of Vimalakīrti, and after which it is said that all the five hundred "Hearers" go off to Vimalakīrti's house. However, before that session is over, Ānanda is shown back with the Buddha, anticipating the return of the disciples. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 121; T.14.553b.13.

STAGE ONE: DOUBLE VISION

At the beginning of the first chapter, the Buddha's perfect and unshakable authority is put before the reader. In a typical Mahāyāna format, he is described seated on the Lion Throne in Vaiśālī, surrounded by a vast array of bodhisattvas, heavenly beings, and eight thousand monks. Throughout the narrative he never leaves this throne, nor does he engage in any other kind of motion. This fixity implies that in the narrative he is established as a well-anchored pylon of authority that serves to ground the shifts in authority that the text seems intent on effecting. As the above sketch of the text's five zones of action suggests, there is a distinctive "to and fro" movement in the text as narrative action leaves the Buddha's presence to travel to Vimalakīrti's room, after which action returns to the Buddha who verifies the entire "episode" and packages it for the reader's lawful consumption. Obviously, for this movement to work well, the rootedness of the Buddha has to be established in the first chapter.

In the opening scene, action begins when five hundred sons of rich merchants in Vaiśālī each offer the Buddha a jeweled parasol. On receiving them, the Buddha magically turns them into one giant parasol under which all universes become visible, along with all the buddhas in those universes. In this gift exchange, the Buddha's rights as a worthy recipient are demonstrated, and more important, we are made aware of his ability to provide a total overview of the Real since, through his powers, everyone onstage can see all things and even all other buddhas. This vision also comes with the comforting detail that these immense universes all rest under this magical jeweled canopy.

Hence, as with the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* the text's action opens up with a legitimized authority figure revealing an extensive, and unrequested, view of the Real that radically exceeds the boundaries of the participants' expectations. Paralleling the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* this initial magical event appears as a metaphor for the text itself since both event and text will be relied on to reveal higher forms of truth and unity even as they disturb prior forms of truth and unity. Or, put slightly differently, all three texts begin with a magical event wherein the specificity of the particular historical "teaching" moment is conjoined with access to the totality of timeless truth, a conjunction that seems to match each text's claim that this specific text will be the final narrative on truth in the Buddhist tradition.

Also, like the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* this magical vision produces a conversation that seeks to understand this unexpected revelation. In this case, this conversation is between the Buddha and Śāriputra, a conversation that is actually created by the Buddha who magically impels Śāriputra to wonder about the contradiction between this perfect

universe just revealed by the parasol trick and the apparent defects of the world as it is normally known. The Buddha, who reads the thoughts that he has just instilled in Śāriputra's mind, then explains to Śāriputra that he specifically intended to give us earthlings a lousy degraded world as part of our instruction, even though it actually is perfect in its own nature. To prove his point about his deception of the world's inhabitants, the Buddha taps his toe on the ground to manifest the world in its "real" purity, completely decked out in jewels.

This opening exchange is crucial for understanding the text's positioning of old-style tradition as it is the only time in the narrative that the Buddha directly gives Śāriputra instruction. Actually, despite the clarity of the vision and the subsequent toe trick, neither demonstration seems to improve Śāriputra or nudge him closer to truth and understanding. Given that this demonstration does not serve to convert or educate Śāriputra, we ought to suspect that this exchange is put here to establish two basic subtexts that frame the rest of the text. First, assuming that Śāriputra stands in for old-style tradition, as he usually does in Mahāyāna literature, the reader learns that reality in the eyes of the Buddha is altogether different from that which tradition, and presumably the reader, had imagined. And, second, the toe trick proves that the Buddha has split reality, and corresponding forms of Buddhism, into two radically different versions: the pure form of reality versus the impure and deluded form that we had thought was the only one.

For readers who come to the text with some allegiance to Śāriputra and the set of traditional Buddhist heroes, this miraculous disclosure certainly would appear disturbing. But even more shocking is the Buddha's explanation that this distorted and impoverished version of the Real that he gave to us earthlings is created precisely for the very purpose of leading degraded and deluded tradition into the correct appropriation of the Real. Thus, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the Buddha is depicted as an "author" of sorts who purposefully creates false appearances, along with their attendant narratives, in order to lead his disciples into truth. Not only that, this deception is explained as the effect of Śāriputra's, and presumably tradition's, shortcomings. As the Buddha says to Śāriputra, "My buddha land has always been pure like this. But because I wish to save those persons who are lowly and inferior, I make it seem an impure land full of defilements, that is all."[5]

It is important to note that instead of simply generating "false" teaching, as he did in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the Buddha is shown as one who has created a

5. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 30; T.14.538c.25. I suspect that in part this is a reworking of the shorter *Land of Bliss Sūtra* in which the Buddha Śākyamuni is said to suffer our degraded world, instead of "authoring" it as he does here. For discussion, see my "Of Texts and Tongues: Orality, Textuality, and Pleasure in the Land of Bliss," forthcoming.

false and even evil world, along with a benighted form of Buddhism that knows neither this basic distortion in the appearance of reality nor its higher purposes. Thus the relatively comprehensible activity of teaching partial or distorted truths, as found in the *Lotus Sūtra,* has now been developed into the mind-boggling reorganization of reality. Undeniably, the duplicity attributed to the Buddha has grown to epic proportions, shifting from the construction of deceptive narratives to generating entirely fabricated world systems.

Hence much like the plots in recent films such as *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show,* the author of the *Vimalakīrti* has doubly destabilized apparent reality by suggesting that not only is apparent reality not final reality, but this apparent reality is generated according to a master narrative. Clearly, though, this means that there are in fact three narrative zones at work. There is the Real, the fake, and the account of those who participate in both, knowing that these two versions of reality fit together as parts of a master narrative. Too, there are various styles of participating in these narratives. The Buddha, Mañjuśrī, and Vimalakīrti manage to participate in all three narratives with apparent ease, while Śāriputra and the rest of the world remain in awe and wonder, never really coming to terms with this double exposure. Actually, the disciples are not alone in being able to accommodate but one version of the Real. Later we will be introduced to bodhisattvas who have existed only on the pure side of the Real, and respond to the Buddha's explanation of the dual tracks of Reality—distorted and Real—with similar surprise and bewilderment.[6]

Reading over the shoulder of Śāriputra, the reader comes to wonder how exactly to take hold of this narrative that explains these two split tracks of reality and which so thoroughly undercuts traditional Buddhist assumptions of value and legitimacy. Arguably, in line with the previous sūtras considered in this book, the *Vimalakīrti* resolves this crisis by offering itself as the solution to the impasse it has created. Thus those readers who continue reading the narrative as an account of a factual historical event in which the inconceivable version of the Real punched through the narrow confines of tradition will gain an explication of the dual levels of the Real, along with the "tool" for moving between those versions of the Real. The tool, of course, will be the narrative itself, which will present itself as the physical object that confers legitimacy and magically ensures the possessor access to the higher version of reality.

The end of this introductory scene mentions that the five hundred boys who gave the parasols gained a kind of enlightenment, but Śāriputra, as just mentioned, remains unaffected and apparently makes no progress. In fact,

6. See Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 114–15; T. 14.552b.

throughout the text he will remain immune to nearly everything he sees and hears. This failure, though, seems to be softened by adding that the eight thousand monks in attendance did make progress: "[They] no longer took in the various dharmas [of the world], cut off the outflows [of desire], and understood the meaning."[7] Hence the Buddha's authority and power is shown to work on the old-school monks, even if this power is limited and in the end largely ineffective. Thus, in the miraculous toe trick, the Buddha's limitless power is demonstrated but in the context of exposing a rupture with tradition that cannot directly absorb this higher narrative about narratives.

STAGE TWO: MEANWHILE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN

The first chapter concludes with the Buddha ending the vision by withdrawing "the supernatural power that he had exercised with his toe, thereby causing the world to return to its former appearance."[8] With the world again appearing as it previously had, the plot advances, though Śāriputra and the reader are now aware of this huge narrative that overshadows and effectively annuls the much smaller narrative of the historical Buddha that they had taken to be final. And, as usual, Śāriputra is shown reacting in shock to this revelation by saying, "[It is] something I have never seen before, and never even heard of—now all the marvelous purity of the buddha land is visible before me."[9] After this revelation and without any sophisticated transition, the second chapter introduces Vimalakīrti with the phrase, "At that time" *(er shi)*.[10]

Vimalakīrti, it turns out, will be the mediator who negotiates these two narratives, so it is no surprise that he is introduced right here where the narrative would otherwise be at an impasse. The problem is that the author of the *Vimalakīrti* is not allowing for Śāriputra's conversion since this scene is paradigmatic for Śāriputra's performances throughout the rest of the text: he is shown truth and cannot assimilate it. Unlike the *Lotus Sūtra,* which is built around the conversion of traditional icons like Śāriputra, the *Vimalakīrti* is much stingier with regard to the conversion and improvement it allows for tradition. Tradition, as represented by these stalwart figures, never gains a foothold in the "real" form of Buddhism that the text is displaying, and forever remains bereft of what the reader is being offered. Assuming that the point of the text is to reveal the authenticity of a higher narrative within

7. T.14.539a.5. Watson's translation seems too interpretive, particularly in the final phrase, which he renders as "and eight thousand monks, ceasing to accept the phenomenal world, put an end to all outflows and gained liberation of mind *(yi jie)*" (*Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 31).

8. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 31, with minor changes; T.14.539a.3. A similar "toe trick" is mentioned in the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines,* Conze trans., p. 270.

9. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 30; T.14.538c.24.

10. T.14.539a.8.

Buddhism that was specifically withheld from normal tradition because of its shortcomings, the author needs to find a place to install this higher narrative. Moreover, he needs to make that higher narrative, and its payload of legitimacy, accessible to the reader who will essentially leapfrog over tradition's representatives, though the reader's attraction for the narrative, and the text that holds it, will be stoked by watching tradition repeatedly fail in its attempt to understand and incorporate Real tradition via Vimalakīrti.[11]

The figure of Vimalakīrti appears well designed to fulfill this role of mediator. His first advantage is that he is elsewhere, away from the Buddhist tradition that has been so thoroughly undermined in this opening sequence. Vimalakīrti lives somewhere else in the same town of Vaiśālī, and in fact it seems that he is living with a family and conducting various kinds of business. Below I deal more explicitly with the details of his character as offered here at the beginning of the second chapter, but first it is important to note that the narrative has arranged a kind of tension based on knowledge and locale.

In short, unlike the conversion sequences that remained rooted in one locale in the *Lotus Sūtra,* here discourse develops in a to-and-fro movement away from the Buddha, with another fully defined authority—the figure of Vimalakīrti—doing the heavy lifting of executing old tradition and establishing the basis for new tradition. Thus, whereas the Buddha was expected to play all these roles in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* here a large portion of the task of overcoming and evacuating tradition's authority has been separated from the Buddha's person and lodged in the figure of Vimalakīrti. Hence we learn that the entirety of Vimalakīrti's life is arranged in order to benefit his neighbors by leading them into the Mahāyāna. Thus:[12]

> Desiring to save others, he employed the excellent expedient of residing in Vaiśālī. His immeasurable riches he used to relieve the poor, his faultless observation of the precepts served as a reproach to those who would violate prohibitions. Through his restraint and forbearance he warned others against rage and anger, and his great assiduousness discouraged all thought of sloth and indolence. Concentrating his single mind in quiet meditation, he suppressed disordered thoughts; through firm and unwavering wisdom he overcame all that was not wise.

In this description of Vimalakīrti's actions, we see that the author has presented him as a paragon of perfection. In fact, this description is literally built out of the Six Perfections that range from giving to wisdom. What all

11. This structure has much in common with the synoptic Gospels, especially Mark, wherein the reader is shown Jesus' real identity as the Son of God, confirmed by the voice from heaven and the sequence of demons and spirits, and yet the other figures onstage, including the disciples, never quite come to terms with this information.

12. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 32; T.14.539a.15.

this means is that the real form of Buddhism—the one that knows about the higher narrative and how to act on it—has been working just fine, it is just that it has been working far from the confines of tradition. Thus, though the Buddha presumably is at home in this higher narrative, and its accompanying degraded version that tradition relied on, the author of the text has chosen to install that higher narrative in the supposedly flesh-and-blood figure of Vimalakīrti. Moreover, it is Vimalakīrti who is defined as actively negotiating the two levels of Buddhism, while the Buddha seems rather passive in this role. Actually, the rest of the narrative will work at negotiating the inclusion of "the higher narrative" from its place in Vimalakīrti's body back into the space between the Buddha and his entourage and then into the reader's hands. Thus there is an odd kind of telescoping to the narrative in which real Buddhism is found at a remove from the Buddha, folded back into him and then offered outward to the reader in the form of the text.

At first the structure of this sequence might be read to imply that the author is allowing that the Buddhist tradition is effectively being assaulted from beyond its perimeters. Of course, this is suggested by making Vimalakīrti's residence exterior to the Buddha's teaching site and by emphasizing his lay status. However, there are good reasons to read this apparent exteriority as a variation on the theme of two fathers in which Vimalakīrti is the new radicalized version of authority that I called Father2 in chapter 4. Though the Buddha will from the outset be made to incorporate both versions of the father (traditional and Mahāyāna), it is Vimalakīrti who in fact plays out the role of Father2, who executes the traditional symbolic world of Father1 and demands a whole new structure of faith and obedience from the reader. This keeps the Buddha out of the fray and certainly keeps him from having to be responsible for the shortcomings of old-style tradition, but it also gives the author more room for serving up a radicalized version of the execution of tradition. Furthermore, by giving Father2 a full-bodied presence in the text, the author has opened up a range of possibilities, including the possibility that the reader is being tempted to adopt a subject position based on the image of Vimalakīrti, a problem I return to below.

As the extensive description of his character makes clear, Vimalakīrti's authority neither derives directly from the current Buddhist tradition nor coexists with it: he is not currently with the Buddha or the traditional Buddhists, and though it is emphasized that he scrupulously served buddhas in past lives, he now represents a threat in the form of a fuller version of tradition outside the limits of conventional tradition:[13]

> At that time in the great city of Vaiśālī there was a rich man named Vimalakīrti. Already in the past he had offered alms to immeasurable numbers of bud-

13. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 32; T.14.539a.8.

> dhas, had deeply planted the roots of goodness, and had grasped the truth of birthlessness. Unhindered in his eloquence, able to disport himself with transcendental powers, he commanded full retention of the teachings and had attained the state of fearlessness. He had overcome the torments and ill will of the devil and entered deeply into the doctrine of the Law, proficient in the Perfection of Wisdom and a master in the employing of expedient means. He had successfully fulfilled his great vow and could clearly discern how the minds of others were tending. Moreover, he could distinguish whether their capacities were keen or obtuse. His mind was cleansed and purified through long practice of the Buddha Way, firm in its grasp of the Great Vehicle, and all his actions were well thought out and planned. He maintained the dignity and authority of a buddha, and his mind was a vast as the sea. All the buddhas sighed with admiration, and he commanded the respect of the disciples, of Indra, Brahma, and the Four Heavenly Kings.

This passage, which gives us our first information about Vimalakīrti, makes clear that he is one who has accomplished a number of things. He has already served innumerable buddhas in the past, mastered various forms of wisdom, and "commanded full retention of the teachings." Obviously, he has been set up as a perfect reservoir for the higher form of tradition. Vimalakīrti, then, stands in that esoteric tradition that the Buddha revealed in the first phase of the narrative, and we are told in several direct ways that he has the respect of all the buddhas—they sigh with admiration—and "he maintained the dignity and authority of a buddha." Also, Vimalakīrti is one who, like Mañjuśrī in the *Lotus Sūtra,* not only remembers all prior teachings but also is at ease maintaining these monstrously large narratives over the course of eons. Thus, like the restructuring of authority in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s first two chapters, Vimalakīrti's authority is essentially produced by generating a grander timeline along which he has performed in a way that currently grants him these extensive, extratraditional privileges.

Apparently, like the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* the text has organized a reading program that begins with an authoritative framing that nonetheless reveals the "death" of normal Buddhist meaning and tradition, and yet promises that tradition is recoverable elsewhere, provided that one will assent to the reconstitution of tradition amidst the ashes of old tradition. In short, another Mahāyāna author has created narrative figures who appear to have the right to "kill" tradition, with this right again appearing as the most convincing proof of access to higher authority and the tradition through which it flows.

FAKING IT: VIMALAKĪRTI'S PECULIAR ILLNESS

Following the omniscient narrator's description of Vimalakīrti at the beginning of the second chapter, the next section narrates a particular trick that

Vimalakīrti performs. This trick has specific "historical" effects, effects that in fact will drive the narrative forward and begin the process of negotiating the two forms of Buddhism that the narrative has created. In both sections of this chapter, Vimalakīrti is depicted as one who functions perfectly as a crossover figure between the two forms of Buddhist tradition that the Buddha explained to Śāriputra in the opening chapter.

Vimalakīrti's deception is a feigned illness that he generates in order to draw all of the city's inhabitants to his sickroom to ask about his illness. Then with the public at his bedside, Vimalakīrti "preaches the Law" to them *(shuofa)*. What exactly "the Law" is, especially spoken of in the singular when the preceding chapter already made clear that there were two forms of truth, two forms of reality, and two forms of Buddhism, will be a recurring question in my reading. For now, suffice it to say that the passages from this setting show Vimalakīrti teaching how to exchange your physical body for the body of a buddha. Having outlined, with various analogies, the evils of a normal human body, Vimalakīrti explains:[14]

> "Good people, a thing like this [human body] is irksome and hateful, and therefore you should seek the buddha body. Why? Because the buddha body is the dharma body. It is born from immeasurable merits and wisdom. It is born from precepts, meditation, wisdom, liberation, and the insight of liberation. It is born from pity, compassion, joy, and indifference. It is born of the various Perfections . . . of the thirty-seven elements of the Way . . . of the four fearlessnesses. . . . Good people, if you wish to gain the buddha body and do away with the ills that afflict living beings, then you must set your minds on highest enlightenment."

The content and circumstances of this teaching are provocative in several ways. First, it is clear that the text, like the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* is offering to the reader, who now has received what the citizens of Vaiśālī received, a promise of becoming identical with the Buddha. They are being encouraged with the teaching that by simply setting their minds on highest enlightenment they will be able to exchange their ordinary bodies for the timeless bodies of the buddhas. Key in his description of this exchange is the emphasis of the buddha-body being born from various Buddhist practices that are listed in an exuberant manner that rehearses cherished lists drawn from both traditional and Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism. In the narrative's enthusiasm for offering this higher body and identity, it seems that the reader is being presented the ingredients for turning himself into a replica of the father by rebirthing himself through Buddhist practices.

The problem, though, is that these directions remain altogether vague

14. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 35–36, with minor changes; T.14.539b.29.

and imprecise. There is no mention of specific practices or stages along the way or the manner in which one might actually engage in these methods. Instead it is the promise that predominates. Also, there are no particular individuals onstage to receive this teaching, and when we learn at the end of the chapter that numberless individuals set their minds on attaining perfect enlightenment, it seems that not much has changed. There are no well-articulated conversion moments or actors who are now taking hold of their identities and enacting the practices as they were exhaustively listed.

The work that this brief account accomplishes, I would argue, is found on another level. Vimalakīrti's teaching to the faceless public demonstrates that he has the right to be teaching. Also, it shows that his offering of the recipe for buddhahood was faithfully received by the public and sanctified by the omniscient narrator who concludes the chapter with the two lines: "In this manner the rich man Vimalakīrti used the occasion to preach the Law to those who came to inquire about his illness. As a result, numberless thousands of persons were all moved to set their minds on the attainment of highest enlightenment."[15] Clearly, then, Vimalakīrti has what the narrative calls "the Law," and in dispensing it, he sets his audience on track for becoming buddhas.[16]

Portraying this successful accomplishment of Buddhist teaching away from the Buddha and his institution poses some other problems, especially since this teaching seems to have laid claim to every important list of Buddhist practices. Though most modern commentators have been eager to see this as evidence that the text is promoting a laicized form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, I see it rather differently. In fact, reasons for resisting the straightforward interpretation of "lay Buddhism" can be found on several layers that I explore throughout the rest of this chapter. For now, let me note that simply in terms of narrative development, energy has been put into convincing the reader of Vimalakīrti's authenticity, his awareness of real tradition, and his teaching prowess. The scene just mentioned in which he instructs the visiting citizens does not seem to highlight his creation of a lay Buddhism redesigned for a nonmonastic group. Instead it works more as a set piece proving Vimalakīrti's powers, via his control over all those forms of practice, and preparing the reader for the next set of encounters between Vimalakīrti and the Buddhist establishment. Thus this generic description of his successful teaching figures as part of a longer sequence in which this moment proves that Vimalakīrti is the singular figure in the narrative who does what the Buddhist institution ought to be doing—instructing and aid-

15. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 36; T.14.539b.11.

16. Though it is not necessary for my reading of the *Vimalakīrti,* one could draw a parallel between this initial performance of owning and dispensing truth and the teaching of the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning* in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

ing its supporters through offering a panoply of practices that the reader would likely have identified as being a summation of various earlier summations of Buddhism.

In fact, once we have been given Vimalakīrti's sickbed teaching, the narrative moves immediately to the problem of contact between Vimalakīrti as the site of authentic and effective teachings, and traditional figures of the Buddhist tradition that the reader would have expected to be responsible for managing, controlling, and conveying tradition. Thus it isn't that the narrative is interested in explaining how perfect Buddhism got into the layman Vimalakīrti—that was covered easily enough by giving him a long cosmic history of serving buddhas. Nor is the narrative interested in the gathered laity's reception of this teaching at his bedside—that was covered in one sentence. Rather, the narrative is interested in playing up how this perfect form of Buddhism was beyond tradition, as it would have been known, and how old-style tradition had to submit to him and his perfect form of tradition. This latter topic will occupy the next two chapters and clearly is the point of focus that the opening two chapters were building up to.

Consequently, I read Vimalakīrti's lay status not as the direct promotion of lay Buddhism but rather as the logical opposite of the monastic form of tradition. If the text's work is dedicated to revamping tradition, it needs, as I have shown with the preceding texts, to locate authority somewhere else and then draw that perfect and hitherto externalized form of tradition into itself. While I am not adverse to the possibility that structuring a narrative about tradition recovering itself in this manner might have profound implications for lay-monastic relations, I still would insist that in the narrative, Vimalakīrti's lay status is arranged to be a cudgel to beat tradition and the reader's expectation that tradition as he had known it was the reservoir of truth. This, of course, doesn't necessarily mean that the text is designed to open up lay Buddhism; rather, it is designed to open up a higher version of tradition, which might take a variety of forms.

TRICKING THE BUDDHA

The arrangement of Vimalakīrti vis-à-vis the monastic tradition is made clearer in the crucial narrative device that will bring them into contact. The end of the second chapter explained that all levels of society in Vaiśālī had come to visit Vimalakīrti, and yet ironically it was only the Buddhists who did not visit. Thus Vimalakīrti's expedient means of faking this illness worked to engage normal society who responded according to standard Indian etiquette and rendered visits to Vimalakīrti during which they received authentic and enlightening teachings. As just mentioned, however, this success is not of much interest to the narrative. What is of interest is the gap between this fine and workable form of Real tradition in the form of Vimalakīrti and

old-style tradition in the form of monastic Buddhism, which has failed even to live up to standard levels of etiquette to which everyone else in Vaiśālī conforms.

This tension is heightened when, at the beginning of third chapter, in one of the few moments in the entire story when we get to hear Vimalakīrti's internal monologue, Vimalakīrti complains, "I am lying here sick in bed. Why does the World Honored One, the Great Compassionate One, not show concern?"[17] The Buddha is aware of his thoughts and orders Śāriputra to visit him to ask about his illness. This moment is pivotal as it begins the lengthy process of negotiating high and low versions of tradition, but it also reveals much about the tension in this kind of reordering of authority. First, in the only other prior full conversation in the text, Śāriputra had spoken under the magical power of the Buddha, and yet here Vimalakīrti speaks through his own will, suggesting that the author is willing to grant full agency to this character. This impression is strengthened when we realize that Vimalakīrti is tricking the Buddha and, moreover, has begun to function as the principal site of authorship, producing a seductive narrative that will work on the internal audience, including the Buddha. Actually, it seems that Vimalakīrti's expedient means here is of a different order from the Buddha's. Whereas the first chapter had explained that the Buddha created our world and its degraded form of Buddhism in order to lead us to truth, nothing seemed to be moving in that direction until Vimalakīrti arrived. Thus Vimalakīrti's expedient means are alone effective in negotiating a problem that the Buddha caused—the separation of truth from tradition.

Though the Buddha immediately knows Vimalakīrti's thoughts, he seems to be taken in by the surface layer of Vimalakīrti's feigned illness. Thus the Buddha telepathically "hears" Vimalakīrti's complaint in earnest and acts to fulfill his wishes by ordering Śāriputra to go to visit him. Never does the narrative return to dress up this mistake of the Buddha's. Nor does the narrative explain the Buddha's participation in this duping as part of the Buddha's higher reading of the situation, which complies with Vimalakīrti's pretenses, presumably knowing the positive outcome to follow.[18]

What this distinctly implies is that though the Buddha was presented in the first chapter as the great author who knew both big and little narratives of truth and negotiated easily between them, here the Buddha is made to suffer the fabricated narrative of another being. Vimalakīrti has, after all, performed an act of expedient means, and the Buddha is shown responding to that fabrication with the earnestness parallel to all the other citizens

17. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 37, with minor changes; T.14.539c.15.

18. In fact, in the fifth chapter, Mañjuśrī tells Vimalakīrti, apparently in all earnestness, that regarding this feigned illness, "The World Honored One countless times has made solicitous inquiries concerning you." Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 65.

of Vaiśālī. In short, this is a truly dangerous place in the narrative where the structure of the text is allowing for the emergence of yet another narrative that had not been included in the initial construction of authority. Vimalakīrti was not part of the Buddha's initial revelation to Śāriputra, and the Buddha's account of how big and little narratives of Buddhist truth existed together did not include mention of Vimalakīrti, who was obviously at that time negotiating just those two narratives on his own and for the benefit of all. Moreover, as the rest of the narrative will show, even though Vimalakīrti's skill in expedient means roughly matches the Buddha's toe trick, in fact, Vimalakīrti's sickbed routine appears to do what the Buddha *was not* doing all this time—bringing these two versions of tradition together and negotiating a happy settlement of their differences.

THE BUDDHA AS STRAIGHT MAN

The inversion of authority implied by the Buddha's participation in Vimalakīrti's ruse is made more evident in the conversations that follow. Now aware of Vimalakīrti's illness, the Buddha orders Śāriputra to visit him. Śāriputra, however, refuses and then gives a long account of an embarrassing encounter with Vimalakīrti that supposedly prevents him from fulfilling the Buddha's command. By developing this theme, which will be replayed ad nauseam for the following two chapters, the author has clarified a number of points.

First, discipline, control, and the flow of information are breaking down in the sphere of old-style tradition. Clearly, Śāriputra is appearing very different from his performance in the opening chapter, where he was a docile puppetlike interlocutor to whom the Buddha magically fed lines and who acquiesced in every way to the Buddha's discourse. In this chapter he is a node of resistance. He refuses to comply with the Buddha's order to visit Vimalakīrti and, equally interesting, gives the Buddha information that the Buddha apparently did not have before. Thus Śāriputra is positioned now as a real Other to the Buddha, an Other with his own will, his own memory of events, and his own judgment about how to act in the present.

What seems to be happening is that narratives emanating from contact with Vimalakīrti are being relayed to the site of old-style tradition where they arrive as news to the Buddha (and the reader) and prevent the normal performance of discipline in the Buddhist hierarchy. The Buddha wants someone to visit Vimalakīrti, and in the course of the chapter he will systematically go down the list of his ten best disciples with no success as each has been touched by Vimalakīrti in a manner that precludes further contact with him. Then, in the following chapter, Maitreya and three other bodhisattvas will reject the Buddha's command in a similar manner. It will only be with Mañjuśrī that the Buddha will find an end to this impasse, a solution

that will include pulling all the erstwhile reluctant members of tradition into Vimalakīrti's sickroom.

Thus the introduction of Vimalakīrti in the narrative reveals two things: first, he is an independent site of action, information, and initiative; second, he has already been "getting at" tradition, even if the Buddha and the reader are only now becoming aware of this problem. This implies, among other things, that old-style tradition had been vapid and "overcome" even before the narrative about Vimalakīrti got started. That is, as the disciples confess their past failures in the face of Vimalakīrti, the reader gains confidence that the coming crisis in the narrative had long-standing antecedents that the disciples themselves knew of, even if the Buddha did not. And, of course, it makes the real time of the narrative appear to have the support of a much longer history that "reliable" figures in the narrative vouch for.

What is really curious in these two chapters of confessions is that instead of reading over Śāriputra's shoulder, or Subhūti's, as we have been accustomed to in the other Mahāyāna sūtras, here we are reading over the Buddha's shoulder, receiving information that is ostensibly destined for him but comes to us nonetheless. On one level, this radical shift in the structure of voicing in this narrative is due to the author's need to have "truthful history" spoken about Vimalakīrti and his ascendancy over normal tradition, and this is achieved by having the disciples address the Buddha, to whom these disciples would, presumably, be most reluctant to lie. But, on another level, something more invidious is being implied. As the disciples turn to the Buddha to confess their failures they are essentially saying, "The teachings that you gave us, the teachings that we thought defined our relationship to you, were after all insufficient."

STAGE THREE: A HISTORY OF FAILURES

These confessions are crucial for staging the text's basic agenda, and the form of these encounters between high and low tradition is essentially defined by the first example in which Śāriputra recounts a ruinous discussion with Vimalakīrti. Śāriputra says to the Buddha:[19]

> "World Honored One, I am not competent to visit him and inquire about his illness. Why? Because I recall one occasion in the past when I was sitting in quiet meditation under a tree in the forest. At that time Vimalakīrti approached and said to me, 'Ah, Śāriputra, you should not assume that this sort of sitting is true quiet sitting. Quiet sitting means that in this threefold world you manifest neither body nor will. This is quiet sitting. Not rising out

19. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 37, with minor changes; T.14.539c.17.

> of your samādhi of complete cessation and yet showing yourself in the ceremonies of daily life—this is quiet sitting. Not abandoning the principles of the Way and yet showing yourself in the ceremonies of everyday life—this is quiet sitting. Your mind not fixed on internal things and yet not engaged with externals either—this is quiet sitting. Unmoved by sundry theories, but practicing the thirty-seven elements of the Way—this is quiet sitting. Entering nirvana without having put an end to earthly desire—this is quiet sitting. If you can do this kind of sitting, you will merit the Buddha's seal of approval *(yinke).*'"

In this mini-history, Śāriputra explains that he was doing what he took to be an authentic Buddhist practice, which he presumably had learned from the Buddha—sitting meditating under the tree—when Vimalakīrti came along and required that his practice take on these cosmic dimensions. This set of higher requirements, which involves the combination of elements normally thought to be antithetical, such as mixing ordinary life with nirvana, leave Śāriputra speechless and effectively void his practice of meaning and authenticity. Obviously, Śāriputra cannot perform in this higher manner, and, as the last sentence makes clear, his legitimacy is revoked by Vimalakīrti's new rules about who should and should not receive "the Buddha's seal of approval." Thus, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the reader is shown tradition's most stalwart figure essentially committing identity-suicide by admitting that he is not in fact suitable to be counted as part of legitimate tradition.

A closer look at this passage makes clear several other things. First, Vimalakīrti isn't really giving a teaching. He is challenging Śāriputra with a series of questions that demand a higher level of practice than Śāriputra had previously been aware of. Crucial to note, though, is that Vimalakīrti's requirements are all of one type: they require that opposites be combined. Of course, this matches the description that the omniscient narrator had given Vimalakīrti himself, since he was a layman but behaved like a buddha and so on. While it is true that Vimalakīrti's demands point to a kind of unthinkability, it is also the case that even here that unthinkability is coming as part of a definition, and on two levels. As the passage makes clear, Vimalakīrti is acting as a law-giving figure who offers new definitions of old projects, much as the Buddha had in the *Diamond Sūtra.* And, second, these new hyped-up versions of basic Buddhist practice are tied, again like the *Diamond Sūtra,* to rightful inclusion in the Buddha's preferred group. In short, Vimalakīrti knows the real definitions of Buddhist practice, and he knows that performing accordingly is the key to gaining authenticity from the Buddha. He is, then, first giving a new form of the law, which comes with a second law that specifies that this new version of the law can be trusted to get one back to the Buddha, with the added caveat that failure to perform in this manner cancels one's legitimacy as a Buddhist.

In effect, Vimalakīrti is giving Śāriputra "the drain plug" treatment. Each

of these questions does not seem to have an answer, and each appears as a completely impossible project that ruptures the fundamental logic of Buddhist practice and the Buddhist cosmology. In essence, then, Vimalakīrti's questions have taken the form and content of the old Buddhist world and spun them together in impossible combinations that suggest he has completely mastered all these levels and exists on a plane where Śāriputra's logic, and the reader's, could in no way apply. Thus this passage, among other things, serves to demonstrate for the reader the possibility of this higher plane of being where normal logic is inapplicable and where the contours of the old world are burst asunder. Of course, the form and content of this literary ploy become clearer once we realize that producing in the reader an image and desire for just such a plane is the overall goal of the text. Conversely, as long as we read naively assuming that Vimalakīrti is a somewhat real character who in fact knows of such a real and unthinkable mode of being, then the function of this rhetoric will remain unnoticed, even as it succeeds in evoking the desires and fears it was designed to elicit.

The rest of the third chapter is dedicated to replaying versions of this basic scene as nine other well-known old-style Buddhist leaders confess their past failures. What is particularly odd in this set of confessions is that they are all introduced identically. Each of the ten confessions replays the framing of the Buddha saying, "You must go visit Vimalakīrti and inquire about his illness," and the disciple responding, "World Honored One, I am not competent to visit him and inquire about his illness. Why?" Given this fixed pattern, a modern reader might sense a kind of parody here with humor emerging from the absurdity of sustained repetition. I am not sure how to interpret the repetition, though it seems to me that the text gains from this firing squad–like definiteness: each major disciple is lined up and given the same devastating treatment, leaving the distinct impression that there is nowhere to hide and that this devastation is total and irrevocable.

In moving through this list of normally beloved disciples, it becomes increasingly clear that the Buddha is now even more thoroughly separated from his traditional followers, since it has been proved that while he has truth in its multiple forms, they clearly don't have a clue. Then, with even Maitreya explaining his failures, it seems that old-style tradition is about to collapse in the face of Vimalakīrti, who now glows with the aura of being the sole representative of the higher tradition that, according to Vimalakīrti, is the only tradition.

It is only Mañjuśrī, the timeless bodhisattva of wisdom, who has not collapsed in front of Vimalakīrti in the past and won't in the present either. Playing a kind of uncle's role that allows the Buddha to stay put, he shepherds the sheepish disciples off to again meet this feared master on the other side of town. Thus, under Mañjuśrī's tutelage, the traditional figures of tradition are peeled away from the Buddha and taken to the house of a

kind of "anti-Buddha" who instructs and insults them in ways that the Buddha never would, and decisively drives a wedge between the Buddha and tradition, a wedge that, however, will turn out to be none other than Real tradition. Important to note in this movement is that again the Buddha's will is being ignored and the plot advances only when the will of another actor is brought to bear—this time it is Mañjuśrī, who actually accomplishes the task of moving the entirety of tradition away from the Buddha and over to Vimalakīrti's abode.

By this time in the text a much bigger narrative problem ought to be evident. The discussions that are unfolding around the Buddha as he sits on the Lion Throne in the Āmra gardens of Vaiśālī are discussions that, clearly, the Buddha had not planned on. Presumably, the teachings the Buddha had begun to give on this day have been completely eclipsed by Vimalakīrti's feigned illness and the series of refusals by his disciples. He had received the five hundred parasols, performed a magic trick, and answered Śāriputra's question with his toe trick. So, with such a large audience gathered and primed, the Buddha was poised to launch into a wonderful teaching, but something else in fact is happening. Much like the arrangement of the *Lotus Sūtra,* we have a perfect setting for a splendiferous teaching, and yet this teaching never arrives, and instead the narrative will wend its way forward by explaining more about that teaching moment and the histories that led up to this most momentous moment, when in fact the only teaching given will be a final validation of the various discourses and actions performed on that strange day in Vaiśālī. Thus the very explicit form of the text is a kind of meta-arrangement, with the Buddha simply reacting to action onstage and then giving his blessing to the various histories that were recounted on that day. In short, the Buddha is made to watch the dialectical conflict of these two forms of tradition, whereupon he legislates a resolution such that the "higher" form of tradition is solidly enfranchised, with the added boon that, like the *Lotus Sūtra,* the higher version contains the lower version as part of its own machinations.

This problem of "no-teaching" in the narrative's construction of the Buddha becomes more evident if we return to question the arrangement of that simple contemporaneous event that opens the second chapter: with the Buddha ready to teach, we learn that elsewhere in town Vimalakīrti is feigning illness and complaining to himself that the Buddha has not come to visit him. As mentioned above, these two events had simply been introduced with no logic or causality connecting them, even though, in fact, these two events are what holds the entire narrative together. Imagine what would happen to the narrative if this action had not been arranged to occur just at this moment. The Buddha would have had nothing to speak of, since no other speech is given to him. His own speech, as it emerges in the narrative, is nothing but an effect of this other event elsewhere in

Vaiśālī—Vimalakīrti's feigned illness. Thus it is only by having the Buddha clairvoyantly hear Vimalakīrti's thoughts that discourse moves forward at the Buddha's own site in the Āmra gardens. In essence, then, the Buddha's voice and intentionality have been stolen since his chance to teach disappears and his discourse is invaded first by Vimalakīrti's complaint and then by the mini-histories that his disciples give him regarding their past failures to live up to Vimalakīrti's expectations.

Structurally, this narrative situation represents perfectly what is happening on the ideological level. Whatever straightforward discourse on content that the Buddha might be expected to give is being taken over by an interloper who hijacks the mind of the Buddha with his feigned illness and sets the agenda for the day's discourse so that it turns into a long exposition of old-style tradition's failure to live up to what is being touted as Real tradition.

Given the interesting way that the narrative upsets direct causality in establishing the day's activities, it is worth pointing out a related problem. Who is the narrator who so easily has access to both spheres in either site in Vaiśālī? One narrator introduced the Buddha's retinue at the Āmra gardens and recounted the miracles that were performed there. Another narrator, who presumably is no different from the first, introduces Vimalakīrti elsewhere in town describing what he is doing "at that time." Thus we have a kind of split-screen narrative that is being managed by someone who appears able to be in both places at once and, given how important shuttling between these two spheres is for the narrative's development, moves between these two zones effortlessly. Of course, when put this way, the narrator appears as the master puppeteer who has arranged his actors to perform according to his overall designs. This problem of the master puppeteer will deepen in the final chapters when, after the Buddha's discourse is lead into Vimalakīrti's zone and then given back to the Buddha for his approval, the Buddha recommends a book version of the entire teaching that requires jumping into yet another frame of reference. I explore this problem in detail below, but for now we ought to appreciate the agility with which the narrator-author is moving between these narrative zones.

Before exploring the events that unfold at Vimalakīrti's, I want to mention several elements of the disciples' confessions that present particularly interesting material. First, and generalizing only slightly, the conversations that the disciples recount regularly include a meta-view on Buddhism such that Buddhist *principles* are turned on Buddhist practices and beliefs. In other words, concepts such as emptiness or renunciation or ineffability are turned on previously established forms of Buddhism, thereby taking what had been the *effect* of Buddhist practice and superimposing it on what had been the *cause* of those effects. Thus Śāriputra's practice of meditation, which traditionally would have been expected to lead to the cessation of

desire and the achievement of nirvana in an understanding of the unreality of the world, is itself now the target for such a critique that presumably would be available *after* one had gained success in meditation.

This confusion of levels is clearer in the second confession when Maudgalyāyana explains how Vimalakīrti upbraided him for his limited style in teaching laymen and laywomen. Maudgalyāyana confesses to the Buddha, "At that time Vimalakīrti approached and said to me, 'Ah, Maudgalyāyana, when you expound the law (dharma) for the white-robed lay believers, you should not expound it in the way you are doing! Expounding the law should be done in accordance with the law itself.'"[20] Here there is clearly a play of words and a mixing of levels. With the word *dharma* meaning both "reality" and "teaching," Vimalakīrti's comments essentially demand that Maudgalyāyana make signifier and signified conform in his teaching. The rest of Vimalakīrti's diatribe is dedicated to listing the impossibility of all concepts such as "living being" or "names," including the impossibility of teaching the dharma, given its unspeakable nature. In making such a requirement, Vimalakīrti is giving the law about giving the law, and he is doing so by confusing a Buddhist ontology of "lack" with the language that evokes that ontology, even as this produces more language.

The irony of this encounter is brought home when Maudgalyāyana closes out his account by mentioning that having witnessed this conversation, "eight hundred lay believers set their minds on highest enlightenment." This detail makes clear that Vimalakīrti's devastating critique of teaching was itself a workable teaching with results that the narrative verifies.[21] Clearly, for the narrative, Vimalakīrti's discourse on lack is signaled as effective for advancing Buddhist agendas, even though it exists on a level won by passing the basic level of Buddhist practice through a disturbing negation. Given what we have seen in the *Diamond Sūtra,* this kind of Buddhist critique of Buddhism isn't that shocking or new.

Subhūti's account of his failure, which comes fourth in the list, is arguably the most radical of the ten vignettes. Subhūti explains how Vimalakīrti challenged him to be a Buddhist by, quite literally, not being a Buddhist. First, Vimalakīrti demands that Subhūti see the different types of food that he has collected for alms as completely equal. In line with his comments to Maudgalyāyana, emptiness as the final mode of being is superimposed on the structured rules of traditional practice with rather disturbing, and even catastrophic, effects. Taking this position on sameness a step further, Vimalakīrti demands that Subhūti abandon the standard divide between good and bad mental states. Thus Subhūti is challenged with the requirement that he is only worthy of his alms if he can practice a form of

20. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 38; T.14.540a.2.
21. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 39; T.14.540a.23.

meta-practice in which he rejects the very act of rejection that had defined the standard form of practice. Vimalakīrti says:[22]

> "Subhūti, if you can *not* cut yourself off from lewdness, anger and stupidity and yet not be a part of these; if you can refrain from destroying the idea of a self and yet see all things as a single nature; if without wiping out stupidity and attachment you can find your way to understanding and freedom from attachment; if you can seem to be a perpetrator of the five cardinal sins and yet gain liberation; if you can be neither unbound nor bound, neither one who has perceived the four noble truths nor one who has not perceived them, neither one who obtains the fruits of religious practice nor one who does not obtain them, neither a common mortal nor one who has removed himself from the ways of the common mortal, neither a sage nor not a sage—if in this manner you can master all phenomenal things and yet remove yourself from the ways that mark them, then you will be worthy to receive food."

Clearly, this set of requirements is again taking the discovered truths of Buddhist doctrine—lack of self, sameness of reality, liberation, and so on—and turning them on the codification of those findings. On this hyperlevel of Buddhist rhetoric, one only gains legitimacy by being Buddhist about being Buddhist, with the consequence that authentic perception is defined by perceiving Buddhist items, such as the four truths, with the very content that those items were designed to represent. Thus, as in the previous Mahāyāna sūtras, form and content are being reorganized so that what was content in a prior formulation of Buddhist truth is extracted and made to work on the form of that categorization. Consequently, Vimalakīrti's remarks demand that one be sagely about being a sage and thereby master this higher form of authenticity.

The next set of questions pushes these inversions further and makes explicit the logic of "being Buddhist about being Buddhist." Vimalakīrti says:[23]

> "Subhūti, if without seeing the Buddha or listening to his Law you are willing to take those six heretical teachers, Purāṇa Kaśyapa, Maskarin Gośālīputra, Samjayin Vairatiputra, Ajita Keśakambala, Kakuda Kātyāyana, and Nirgrantha Jñatīputra, as your teachers, leave the household life because of them, and follow them in falling into the same errors they fall into, then you will be worthy to receive food."

This command to be more fully Buddhist by showing one's renunciation of Buddhism through the adoption of the teachings of the non-Buddhist "heretics" presents some very interesting problems. Obviously, this project requires a level of doublethink: one's task, as Vimalakīrti establishes it, is to pass through a negation of one's Buddhist identity in order to regain that

22. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 41–42; T.14.540b.23.
23. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 42; T.14.540b.29.

Buddhist identity. Of course, we have seen versions of this structure in both the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* but here the bar has been raised since the execution of one's prior Buddhist identity is now confirmed by the positive identity of consorting with the out-group heretics.

Vimalakīrti raises the bar even higher in the following paragraph when he requires that Subhūti join with the host of devils and make defilements his companions, including having "hatred for all living beings, slandering the buddhas, vilifying the Law, not being counted among the assembly of monks, and in the end, never attaining nirvana." "If you can do all this," the narrative continues, "then you will be worthy to receive food."[24] Clearly, the author is delighting in having Vimalakīrti develop that anomic space of negation in the movement from lower to higher forms of Buddhism. Unlike the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* the *Vimalakīrti* expands simple negation and lack into positive forms of specifically anti-Buddhist acts such as hatred, lust, slandering of the buddhas, and so forth. However, all this is set up so that in the end Subhūti can rightfully reclaim his alms gathered according to traditional forms of practice. In short, we are again faced with a rhetoric that implies a self-consuming logic, even though this process is destined to return the Buddhist subject to the same Buddhist world with its traditional practices still in place, albeit now destabilized to some degree.

Subhūti explains that he was devastated by this encounter and only finds an exit when Vimalakīrti tells him to continue begging without being afraid since, "If some phantom person conjured up by the Buddha were to reprimand you as I have just done, you would not be afraid, would you?"[25] Subhūti agrees that he would not be afraid, and Vimalakīrti drives his point home by saying that all language is separate from reality and therefore should not be feared. The irony of this closing is that Subhūti, like Maudgalyāyana, concludes his mini-history by adding, "When Vimalakīrti expounded the Law in this manner, two hundred heavenly beings gained the purity of the dharma eye."[26] Thus, though the closing topic is the phantomlike quality of the encounter and the unreality of language, still there is a choruslike group of observers who faithfully receive the language about unreal language and thereby advance—the two hundred heavenly beings win the dharma eye, an advance that the narrative chooses not to deconstruct in any manner. In short, just as in the *Diamond Sūtra,* the cutting edge of the negation is applied to various aspects of tradition, but the net result of this operation is the reproduction of traditional gains—merit, the dharma eye, and so on—and in a form that never again has to face the knife of negation.

24. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 42–43; T.14.540c.10.
25. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 43; T.14.540c.15.
26. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 43; T.14.540c.20.

Much could be gained from closely reading the play of these ten mini-histories, but for the purposes of my arguments, I will leave this section of the narrative with the case of Ānanda, who is the final disciple to confess his failures. Ānanda's story is built around the replay of a well-known story in which Ānanda went to beg milk for the Buddha, who was ill. Ānanda explains why he will not visit Vimalakīrti:[27]

> "World Honored One, I am not competent to visit him and inquire about his illness. Why? Because I recall once in the past when the World Honored One was feeling somewhat ill and needed some cow's milk. I at once took my begging bowl, went to the home of one of the great Brahmans, and stood by the gate. At that time Vimalakīrti approached and said to me, 'Ah, Ānanda, what are you doing standing here early in the morning with your begging bowl?' I replied, 'Layman, the World Honored One is suffering from a slight bodily illness and needs some cow's milk. That's why I've come here.
>
> But Vimalakīrti said, 'Hush, hush, Ānanda! Never speak such words! The body of the Tathāgata is diamond-hard in substance. All evils have been cut away, manifold good things gather there. How could it know illness, how could it know distress? Go your way in silence, Ānanda, and do not defame the Tathāgata. Don't let others hear you speaking such coarse words. Don't let these heavenly beings of great majesty and virtue and these bodhisattvas who have come from pure lands of other regions hear such utterances. . . . If the non-Buddhists and Brahmans should hear such talk, they would think to themselves, 'Why call this man Teacher? He cannot save himself from illness, so how could he save others from their illnesses?' Slip away quickly so no one will hear what you have said!"

Here the narrator has provided Vimalakīrti with an altogether different script. As the passage makes clear, two main issues are put forward. First, the author is reworking this story to correct what he takes to be a serious misunderstanding of the Buddha's body and identity. In line with the speech that he put in Vimalakīrti's mouth as he lectured the visiting citizens of Vaiśālī, the Buddha's perfect diamond-like body is upheld as a truly magical item free from all the shortcomings of normal bodies.

The second issue is more interesting and revolves around the issues of public perception. Vimalakīrti, for all the tough talk he dished out to the other disciples, even daring them to be truly Buddhist by taking up with non-Buddhist teachers, is here shown acutely anxious over what the non-Buddhist public might think of Buddhism if it became known that the Buddha became ill and needed this cow's milk. Here the phantomlike quality of language that he pushed on Subhūti in the passage cited earlier has completely disappeared. In a near panic, Vimalakīrti keeps trying to silence

27. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 49–50; T.14.542a.2.

Ānanda's comments that seem to undercut what the author wants to put forward as the real definition of the Buddha's physical being.

What are we to make of these apparent inconsistencies in the author's presentation of Vimalakīrti's evaluation of the power of language? The best answer to this question seems to be that as long as Vimalakīrti as a literary figure attacks old-style Buddhist notions of value and closure, he can be as radical and threatening as necessary. When, on the other hand, he produces language that is floating into the truly public sphere of competitive Indian religions, he becomes altogether circumspect, worrying about the effect misguided language might have on Buddhism and its public cachet. Once we categorize Vimalakīrti's evaluation of language in this manner, we are quite close to the two-pronged problematic organizing the entire text: as long as old-style Buddhism is the target, there are no holds barred, but for turning that attack into a new, packaged form of Buddhism, much care is exercised in rendering language attractive, effective, and altogether consonant with the author's sense of various expected audiences. That is to say, Vimalakīrti's concern for the public perception of Buddhism cannot be far from the author's concerns for public perception as he presents a narrative that he has calculated to be effective in shifting the reader's notion of Buddhism.

The absolute impasse presented in Ānanda's story is avoided in an odd way that will be relied on again at another particularly important moment in the narrative. The author has Ānanda explain, "But at that moment I heard a voice in the sky saying, 'Ānanda, it is as the layman has said. But the Buddha has appeared in this evil world of five impurities and at present is practicing the Law so as to save and liberate living beings. Go, Ānanda, get the milk and do not feel ashamed.'"[28] This voice from heaven certainly resolves the conflict and returns the basic integrity of the story as it would have been known to a traditional reader, even as it also confirms Vimalakīrti's authenticity.

The chapter closes by noting that the other five hundred disciples likewise refused to visit Vimalakīrti, "each declaring, 'I am not competent to visit him and ask about his illness.'" In sum, then, this chapter has effectively eviscerated all the standard heroes of earlier Buddhism and established Vimalakīrti as the preeminent spokesperson for this higher and uniquely legitimate form of Buddhism. Furthermore, this chapter has excited the reader with all sorts of impossible and unthinkable goals and desires while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of maintaining order and decorum, especially in the face of the public.

28. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 50–51; T.14.542a.20.

MAITREYA TAKES A FALL—VIMALAKĪRTI'S VERSION

The fourth chapter continues in the same vein of the Buddha serially requesting members of his audience to visit Vimalakīrti. The difference, though, is that this chapter is dedicated to four mini-histories given by bodhisattvas. Again maintaining order and a sense for hierarchy, the narrative has separated ordinary disciples from the more elevated bodhisattvas, both in putting them in separate chapters and in building something of a ladder of ascent that will culminate in the next chapter when Mañjuśrī finally accepts the Buddha's charge and leads the entire entourage off to visit Vimalakīrti. In short, there is an ordered plot here that is designed to build tension by working through a set of categories that the author seems to have expected his reading audience to recognize.

In addition to the shift to an "all-bodhisattva" review, these four vignettes differ from the previous ten in three ways. First, each is significantly longer and more developed in terms of narrative. Second, in the four bodhisattvas' stories, Vimalakīrti is *asked* questions instead of posing questions as he had for the hapless disciples. Third, whereas the disciples' vignettes often led to silence or awkward impasse, the bodhisattva stories open up to well-developed teachings with Vimalakīrti being given significant space to explore rather positive teaching that, for instance, cover all the Six Perfections. Thus whereas in the disciples' stories Vimalakīrti's main narrative work is to overcome and destroy any of the particular positions or practices that the various disciples were engaged in, here he is made into a spokesperson for more positive-sounding tenets of the Mahāyāna.

First on the list of these four bodhisattvas is Maitreya. As in the *Lotus Sūtra,* Maitreya's identity as the coming buddha draws particular attention to itself. Given that the *Vimalakīrti* has already offered buddha-bodies to all listeners at the site of Vimalakīrti's public teaching in the second chapter, the problem is the same: traditional Buddhism only allowed that Maitreya would inhabit a buddha's body and the rest of us could hope for no more than nirvana and liberation. Here, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* all of that needs to be upended—the uniqueness of Maitreya has to be voided to allow all beings the possibility of being a future buddha, that is, a bodhisattva. Thus, though the story that Maitreya tells parallels those already told by the disciples, the topic of his failure focuses on destroying his unique rights to accede to the throne as the next buddha. As the following passages make clear, the author seems highly aware that the problem of Maitreya's singular identity needs to be overcome and opened up to all.

Equally clear, the author is addressing what in many ways was an unavoidable problem: how to push a view of emptiness, and the impossibility of categories, and yet avoid the collapse of meaning and hierarchy, and, in particular, the flow of authority in some predictable and legitimate form of

transmission. In short, these passages temporarily ruin Maitreya's identity and authority with an emptiness critique that will withhold transmission from him, leaving him essentially stranded until the final chapter, where he receives this book as the emblem of his regained status as the coming buddha. Hence, whereas the above critiques of the disciples took the effect of Buddhist practices and turned it on the causative practices of Buddhism, here the process is reversed: Maitreya's failure, as the effect of this discourse, is turned into the cause for his future authenticity. Thus, as is usual in early Mahāyāna sūtras, this discourse is appearing on two levels where it is both the corrosive problem and the healing solution to that problem.

Taking liberties with standard Buddhist cosmology, the author first allows that Maitreya is actually on site at Vaiśālī—Maitreya is normally imagined in Tuṣita Heaven during Śākyamuni's lifetime. Then, in an equally brazen detail, the author allows that Vimalakīrti was recently in Tuṣita Heaven, asking Maitreya about his identity. Essentially apropos of nothing, Vimalakīrti approaches Maitreya in heaven and begins undermining his unique identity as the coming buddha.[29]

> At that time Vimalakīrti approached and said to me, "Maitreya, the World Honored One prophesied that with one more birth you will be able to attain highest enlightenment. Now just what birth does this prophecy apply to? Does it apply to your past birth, your future birth, or your present birth? If it applies to a past birth, that past birth has already passed into extinction. If it applies to a future birth, that future birth has yet to arrive. And if it applies to a present birth, this present birth lacks permanence. For as the Buddha has said, 'Monks, one moment you are born, the next you grow old, the next you pass into extinction.' "

The questioning continues in this vein as the author supplies the Vimalakīrti figure with a very standard Buddhist rhetoric regarding the lack of substance in any particular happening. It is crucial to note that this critique is being directed at the transmission of authority. Thus, just as in the section of the *Diamond Sūtra* where the Buddha's teaching and his relationship to Dīpaṃkara were unhinged, the rhetoric of negation here is directed to the prophesy that holds Maitreya in line to be the next buddha. Emphasizing the impossibility, or at least impropriety, of claiming to be the next buddha, Vimalakīrti shifts from an argument of time to an argument of nonproduction: "If you were given this prophesy because of some birth that pertains to suchness, you should know that in suchness there is no birth. And if you were given this prophecy because of some extinction that pertains to suchness, you should know that in suchness there is no extinction."[30]

29. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 52; T.14.542b.1.
30. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 52–53; T.14.542b.9.

While upsetting Maitreya's plans at first seems without a clear agenda, the following section leaves little doubt that the "philosophic damage" that Vimalakīrti is shown inflicting on Maitreya has some very pointed objectives that have everything to do with opening up Maitreya's identity as a site to be inhabited by all. Following the just quoted line, Vimalakīrti begins to structure the gains of his assault:[31]

> All living beings are a part of suchness, and all other things as well are a part of suchness. The sages and worthy ones too are a part of suchness; even you, Maitreya, are a part of suchness. So if you have been given a prophecy of enlightenment, then all living beings should likewise be given such a prophesy. Why? Because suchness knows no dualism or differentiation. If you, Maitreya, are able to attain highest enlightenment, then all living beings should likewise be able to attain it. Why? Because all living beings in truth bear the marks of bodhi. If you, Maitreya, are able to gain nirvana, then all living beings should likewise be able to gain it. Why? Because the buddhas know that all living beings bear the marks of tranquil extinction, which is nirvana, and that there is no further extinction. Therefore, Maitreya, you must not use doctrines such as this to mislead these offspring of the gods.

In Vimalakīrti's attack, the author has scripted an apparently logical argument that first moves from claiming that because ontologically all beings are equal, phenomenologically or "spiritually" they all ought to be the same too. That is, Vimalakīrti puts forward the argument that there can be nothing inherently special, unique, or distinctive about anyone—given the same suchness of being in all living beings—and thus Maitreya's uniqueness in the lineage of buddhas is untenable. In effect, Vimalakīrti is arguing that lineage is an absurdity in view of suchness and the other Buddhist perspectives on impermanence and birthlessness just mentioned in the preceding lines.

Thus, again quite in line with the *Diamond Sūtra's* rhetoric that problematized that link between the Buddha and Dīpaṃkara, here Vimalakīrti is performing in such a manner that produces a higher version of authority that arrogates to itself the power to remove the legitimacy of that traditionally constructed moment of transmitting authority forward in time. Unlike the *Diamond Sūtra,* the *Vimalakīrti* more directly points to the untenable nature of unique transmission in order to explicitly open up future buddhahood for all. Also, unlike the *Diamond Sūtra,* the *Vimalakīrti* is taking a version of the Buddhist teaching of emptiness and applying it in a democratizing manner. The reader is now learning that it is all or none when it comes to becoming a buddha. If Maitreya was to be the next buddha, all beings should be assured of the same destiny based on the structure of the argument of "same ontology means same destiny."

This, of course, is that moment in the text where the reader is being

31. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 53; T.14.542b.12.

offered everything that had previously been withheld from him in the prior articulation of Buddhist value and hierarchy. If the reader accepts Vimalakīrti's argument as an unmotivated statement of fact that really occurred in some historical sense in Tuṣita Heaven, quite separate from the literary framings and calculated agendas of the text he is consuming, then he has just received something like a prophecy of buddhahood. Vimalakīrti has, after a fashion, just been made to perform in a manner that suggests that the good news is that all beings are to become buddhas. Thus just as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* as Maitreya is opened up into a public identity, the reader is tempted with a dialectical promise: believe the legitimacy of the text in order to receive from it that promise of ultimate legitimacy in which legitimacy, in the form of the Buddha's prophecy that his identity will repeat in the future, now will be rightfully attached to the reader.

I explore this rhetoric explaining the transmission of the text below, but for the moment let me note that the story Maitreya offers ends without resolution. Maitreya doesn't have any suitable response to Vimalakīrti's challenges, and no voice from heaven speaks up to resolve the impasse as it did in Ānanda's case and as it will again in the third of these bodhisattva vignettes. Thus the text reveals a bit of sophistication here. It leaves Maitreya hanging in a manner that likely would disturb the believing reader. One might assume that the author expected this destruction of Maitreya to be left here, but in fact, the narrative will return to pick up Maitreya and rightfully reinstall him in his place as the coming buddha. Thus, as in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra,* the narrative has a distinctive dialectical progression that functions like a plot: dramatic tension is created, spread over a number of narrated scenes, and then resolved in a satisfying manner.

YOU CAN GIVE THE MAIDENS TO ME

The other three bodhisattvas' stories are interesting for their thematics, but to keep my reading reasonably brief, I'll discuss only the particularly interesting third story in which Vimalakīrti inherits twelve thousand maidens and teaches them to shift from the pursuit of pleasure to the pursuit of "dharma pleasure/delight" *(fale).* The full efficacy of this substitution is confirmed when the narrative has these women resist returning to their original owner, Māra (the Buddhist devil), because they claim that the pleasures that Vimalakīrti has given them *fulfill* their desires so thoroughly that they can't be bothered with old-style desires. They say to Māra, "You gave us to this layman [Vimalakīrti]. Possessing this Dharma delight that affords us such pleasure, we no longer delight in the pleasures of the five desires *(you fale keyi ziyu, bu ying fule wuyu leye).*"[32]

32. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 58; T.14.543a.28.

This story, which is one of the longer of the fourteen encounters with Vimalakīrti, invites a number of readings. On one level, this is a racier version of what overcoming might imply. The pleasure of overcoming lower-level pleasures is spoken of not as a divorce or an extraction from that lower level but as a form of satisfaction that returns to that prior zone and fills it out completely, and then some.

Arguably, just this same structure defines the author's reconstruction of Maitreya; in both cases particularity and a kind of uncomfortable closure are first overcome by a universalism won through negation and transcendence, which then, nonetheless, returns to inhabit that space, even as it radically redefines that space. Maitreya will, in the end, hold total legitimacy in the book form of this narrative, but it is a legitimacy that ironically speaks of the legitimacy of every reader and the reader's deep sameness with Maitreya. Just so, these maidens will return to Māra and live with him in the world of lust and desire, but only after their transcendence over desire has been vouchsafed through their grander desire for the higher form of "dharma pleasure." Moreover, this return will be guided by the teaching named "Inexhaustible Lamp" *(Wujin deng)* that Vimalakīrti transmits to them, a teaching that will presumably light their way as they return to the netherworld of Māra. Though the actual content of this teaching of the "Inexhaustible Lamp" is left vague, the narrative explains its powers, and it turns out that this teaching does exactly what the *Vimalakīrti* promises to do:[33]

> Vimalakīrti replied, "Sisters, there is a teaching called the Inexhaustible Lamp. You must study it. This Inexhaustible Lamp is like a single lamp that lights a hundred or a thousand other lamps, till the darkness is all made bright with a brightness that never ends. In this same way, sisters, one bodhisattva guides and opens a path for a hundred or a thousand living beings, causing them to set their minds on attaining highest enlightenment. And this desire for the Way will never be extinguished or go out. By following the teaching as it has been preached, one keeps adding until one has acquired all good teachings. This is what is called the Inexhaustible Lamp."

Clearly, what the narrative is offering here is an alternative mode of transmitting the totality of Buddhist truth in which the anxieties over the linear reproduction of truth and authenticity, as described in the prior story of Maitreya, are overcome as the reception and reduplication of a certain magically inexhaustible teaching allows one to correctly convert numberless bodhisattvas and lead them to truth as a single lamp lights many other lamps. Notable, too, is that the analogy for this process of endless reproduction of authenticity takes the form of a lamp, implying again the desire to make language look natural and as effulgent and unavoidable as light.

33. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 59; T.14.543b.18.

Also, we should not miss the obvious fact that this is another Mahāyāna seduction story that seems intended to aid the text in seducing the reader. Thus it is not by accident that the story is a story of the shifting of desire from one locale to the person of Vimalakīrti who satisfies the maidens so thoroughly and offers them a gift that will keep on giving, just as this text hopes to do. Thus, in line with the way the Burning House parable showed Śāriputra, and the reader, the power and usefulness of desire, this story demonstrates that what at first seemed like a problem—these maidens with their desires for the five sense realms—could be reconfigured so that those very desires become the solution to being authentic and then bind, at least temporarily, these maidens to the truth-giving Vimalakīrti. In the end, though these maidens are returned to Māra, they have fallen in love long enough to have received a transmission that will fill them with satisfaction and generate more authenticity as it moves outward.

But why did the author choose to depict this vignette as one of carnal desire reformed? Is this simply the recycling of the old Buddhist motif of overcoming desire via a Buddhist satisfaction born of renouncing desire? Or is the text interested in evoking the maidens and their desires for other purposes? If we are right in seeing the text as a sustained attempt to evoke and direct the reader's desires, then we ought to interpret this vignette more in line with the arc of the narrative. In that case, this mini-history is lodged here as a kind microcosm of the text's more general project—how to seduce the reader with the figure of Vimalakīrti and then enlist the reader in the work of seducing others. This vignette shows that Vimalakīrti is just the kind of person to effect such a transformation and redirection of desire, but the mode in which this is proven no doubt generates other layers of desire in the reader, who now knows that bodhisattvas get to work with maidens and furthermore can be expected to succeed in satisfying them so completely that they never want to go back to carnal lust, even when, in fact, they do go back to carnal lust. Arguably, then, this story is tantalizing the reader with all sorts of possibilities for the way that engaging Vimalakīrti and his teachings might play out in the world.

Furthermore, despite the light metaphor that closes out the mini-narrative, there is an undeniable kind of underground feeling to the whole situation of the maiden's return to Māra's palace. What might this imply? Since these women aren't ever named or in any way identified as particular individuals, I hesitate to assume that these details serve to promote a straightforwardly pro-feminist version of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This hesitation is further warranted when we note that we never hear again of these women or the Inexhaustible Lamp teaching. The gift downward of pleasure and truth seems to function in the narrative more as a spur to desire what Vimalakīrti has to give, and to set up a template for the reader's own reception of the text "from" Vimalakīrti. Thus in consuming this story the

reader is encouraged to believe that however distant and underprepared he or she might feel vis-à-vis these difficult discussions, still he or she should not lose hope in receiving from Vimalakīrti a full transmission of truth and tradition.

Of course, too, this image of the maidens returning to Māra, albeit with the lofty teachings of the Inexhaustible Lamp, maps on to the reader's intended reaction. The reader, too, will receive magical teachings from Vimalakīrti in accepting the text as authentic but then will have to return to the confines of his or her prior life. In particular, this likely means that the reading Buddhist is being given a template for his consumption of the text in which the text describes itself as the pleasure-giving item that, once received with desire, will be forever present as the reader returns to the "normal" world where he might appear to be engaging in the old-style activities but will in fact be filled, and fulfilled, by this higher teaching, which explodes, on one level, the coordinates of that traditional space, even as it continues to occupy that space.

These tracks of interpretation are strengthened when we notice that at the end of the maiden story Vimalakīrti adds, "Although you live in the palace of Māra, with this Inexhaustible Lamp you can enable countless heavenly sons and heavenly daughters to set their minds on attaining highest enlightenment. Thus you will repay the debt of gratitude *(foen)* you owe the Buddha and at the same time bring great benefit to all living beings."[34] This final line in the story suggests a kind of underground populism reaching to men and women beyond the Buddhist institution, but it is populism that moves under the pulsion of a debt structure that links all participants back to the Buddha to whom all owe a "debt of gratitude" just as the *Lotus Sūtra* did. Presumably, this debt structure works like patriarchal forms of identity: it is an invisible presence that the recipient carries from the paternal giver, a presence that forever shapes and dictates subjectivity and the goal of action, whatever circumstances one might find oneself in. Thus, while women do seem to be included as intended recipients of truth, the father-giving structure of truth and legitimacy remains androcentric in both form and logic.

STAGE FOUR: A ROOM WITH A VIEW

With the four bodhisattva stories told, the narrative finally moves into chapter five where Mañjuśrī, unlike all other figures in the text, accepts the Buddha's command and prepares to visit Vimalakīrti. Before leaving the Buddha's company, Mañjuśrī produces a statement that confirms Vimalakīrti's

34. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 59; T.14.543b.25.

perfection in every way, thereby sealing Vimalakīrti's identity as the incarnation of perfect Buddhism, saying to the Buddha:[35]

> World Honored One, that eminent man is very difficult to confront. He is profoundly enlightened in the true nature of reality and skilled in preaching the essential of the Law. His eloquence never falters, his wisdom is free of impediments. He understands all the rules of bodhisattva conduct and nothing in the storehouse of the buddhas is beyond his grasp. He has overcome the host of devils and disports himself with transcendental powers. In wisdom and expedient means he has mastered all there is to know. Nevertheless, in obedience to the Buddha's august command, I will go visit him and inquire about his illness.

Besides authenticating Vimalakīrti as a zone of perfect mastery and legitimacy, this passage sheds some light on a lingering problem in the narrative—the disciples' disobedience. As Mañjuśrī's final line makes clear, all the other disciples have failed not only in their encounters with Vimalakīrti, but they have also failed to follow out the Buddha's command to go to visit him. This failure is more notable given that a visit to Vimalakīrti would presumably enlighten the disciples, just as it did for all the other townspeople mentioned in the second chapter. What this means is that the narrative has triply shamed the disciples. They are made to confess past failures as grounds for currently disobeying the Buddha's orders and are then further insulted in that they are shown resistant to go to truth, preferring instead to linger next to the Buddha where clearly they are not so challenged.

Now with Mañjuśrī assenting to the Buddha's wishes, the entire assembly that had been grouped around the Buddha anticipates that this is certainly going to be a spectacle and decides to quit the Buddha, saying, "Now these two great men, Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti, will be talking together, and they will surely expound the wonderful Law *(miaofa)*."[36] That the narrative requires this exit is, of course, a little troubling. The assembly is overtly leaving the Buddha to find truth elsewhere, implying thereby that the Buddha's presence was insufficient for their needs. Lurking here, too, is that narrative problem that I brought up above. If this series of confessions had not occurred and culminated in Mañjuśrī's decision to lead the assembly off to see Vimalakīrti, then the Buddha would have been provided with no discourse to give on this particular occasion. Thus the author has triply hijacked the Buddha's teaching sphere: he provides the Buddha with nothing to say, requires the Buddha to submit to Vimalakīrti's narrative of his feigned illness, and has his assembly leave to find "the wonderful Law" elsewhere.

35. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 64; T.14.544a.27.
36. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 64; T.14.544b.4.

Although a line-by-line analysis of chapters 5 through 10, in which Vimalakīrti explains to various interlocutors the details of his version of Buddhism, would be rewarding, I will limit myself to comments on three themes: Śāriputra's humiliations, the goddess's appearance, and being Buddhist about being Buddhist. Before exploring these themes, though, it is worth pointing out that with regard to the fairly heterogeneous content in these middle chapters there are some observable patterns. First, there is a steady fluctuation in speakers—Vimalakīrti speaking with Mañjuśrī and then Vimalakīrti speaking to Śāriputra. Though other speakers will arise, such as a nameless goddess and an equally nameless phantom bodhisattva, along with a list of named bodhisattvas who make paragraph pronouncements throughout the ninth chapter, the basic structure of the discussions alternates as Vimalakīrti addresses Mañjuśrī and then Śāriputra.

This pivotlike role given to Vimalakīrti is evident, too, in the way that Mañjuśrī never addresses Śāriputra. Similarly, none of the other actors or actresses onstage ever addresses anyone but Vimalakīrti, save for a phantom bodhisattva and the goddess who both address Śāriputra and in fact temporarily play roles that match Vimalakīrti's. Consequently, though we are invited to imagine all these figures in the same room, the author works up discourses that remain bounded by some fairly simple rules that do not allow for an "open" and free-ranging discussion. Except for the scene between Śāriputra and the goddess, all discussion focuses on the figure of Vimalakīrti who receives all discourse, implying that the author is writing from a rather limited notion of subjectivity, with Vimalakīrti ever at the center, engaging various figures who perform functions that are always defined by their relationship to him. Also, the transitions between different discussions are nearly absent, and thus there is a noticeable bumpiness as the author forces the narrative to move between these sectioned-off discussions without building a plotline that could explain their causal connections.

More interestingly, in these conversations Mañjuśrī seems not to be developed as a full Other to Vimalakīrti. He simply asks a series of questions and never shows any reaction to Vimalakīrti's answers. Nor does he demonstrate any emotion or actual involvement in the discussion. In fact, reading through Mañjuśrī's lines gives the distinct impression that he is little more than a foil for the author to construct an essay in the image of a conversation. The basic template followed has Mañjuśrī ask a one-sentence question to which Vimalakīrti gives a paragraph-long answer to which Mañjuśrī asks another one-line question and so on. In fact, this pattern of eliciting language from Vimalakīrti is so relied on in the fifth chapter, that halfway through the chapter Mañjuśrī is dropped altogether, and Vimalakīrti alone poses questions to himself in defining the bodhisattva practices that he is promoting.

This style of exchange shifts noticeably when Vimalakīrti speaks with Śāriputra. Śāriputra, for the various insults that are heaped on him, actually is a much more fully developed character and responds to Vimalakīrti not simply with leading questions but also with responses that show that he has actually received Vimalakīrti's comments and has some opinion about them, along with an emotional reaction. Moreover, whereas Mañjuśrī's questions simply lead Vimalakīrti through his virtuoso performance of topics such as nondualism, Śāriputra's questions and responses serve to move the narrative forward. Thus when Śāriputra worries about chairs or food for the gathered audience, these worries result in long discussions from Vimalakīrti and the intervention of beings from other world systems who arrive and perform major narrative tasks. In sum, oddly enough, Śāriputra's persona is designed to do much more heavy lifting in the way of narrative development than any other figure in the drama. Similarly, Śāriputra is the main figure onstage who is shown responding emotionally to anything that is said or done. Vimalakīrti is never described emoting, a crucial distinction for evaluating the reader's place of identification.

CUT OFF AT THE KNEES: ŚĀRIPUTRA'S HUMILIATIONS

Within the bumpy alternating sequence of discussions, there are three distinct episodes in which Śāriputra is humiliated in ways that prove the grandeur of Vimalakīrti's Mahāyāna teachings and the insufficiency of standard tradition. Though these moments of humiliation are marked as more proof of the end of Śāriputra's notion of the Real and the legitimacy of old-style tradition and though he and Mahākāśyapa are shown responding in dismay to the information from Vimalakīrti, modern commentators have insisted that these episodes are funny. As I mentioned above, no one laughs at any time in the text, nor is humor explicitly mentioned as the emotion experienced by the internal audience. The attribution of humor, it would seem, then, is produced when we read these passages with a Mahāyāna perspective that enjoys the humiliation of Śāriputra and old-style tradition, not for humorous reasons per se, but rather in a spiteful sense of enjoying seeing someone undone—a kind of schadenfreude.

In the first of the three humiliations, the narrative moves from the initial discussion between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī on emptiness and the liberation of the buddhas to take us into Śāriputra's thoughts. It seems that while this heady discussion is going on, Śāriputra is wondering where everyone is to sit since now all the figures of tradition are lodged in Vimalakīrti's rather ordinary room. This thought is intercepted by Vimalakīrti, who pulls it from Śāriputra's mind, publicizes it for the internal audience, and then uses it as the basis for the next round of action.

> The rich man Vimalakīrti, knowing what was in his mind, said to Śāriputra, "Did you come here for the sake of the Law, or are you just looking for a place to sit?" Śāriputra said, "I came for the Law, not for a seat." Vimalakīrti said, "Ah, Śāriputra, a seeker of the Law doesn't concern himself even about life or limb, much less about a seat. A seeker of the Law seeks nothing in the way of form, perception, conception, volition, or consciousness; he seeks nothing in the way of sense-realms or sense-medium; he seeks nothing in the three-fold world of desire, form, and formlessness."[37]

The level of insult in this exchange isn't fully perceptible unless modern readers switch to a more familiar format. For instance, consider what it would be like reading a narrative in which Jesus pays a visit to a fictive character who insults him in this most demeaning of ways. There obviously will not be anything funny about such a story if the reader is reading with Christian allegiances. On the other hand, switching to this Christian setting is useful as one can read many segments of the Gospel narratives as parallel to this Vimalakīrti setup. Jesus, as a Vimalakīrti-like narrative creation, is put in a series of set pieces in which he humiliates figures of authority that, for first-century Jewish readers, would have been assumed to have authority and status—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin Council, and so on.

In either case, I suggest that understanding Christian or Mahāyāna rhetorics of overcoming requires a good bit more sensitivity to the way readers process such turning of the tables and the way various pleasures and excitements are generated by narratives in which superficially antinomian characters unseat figures assumed to have power and legitimacy. Clearly, these sequences serve to replace one version of the Law with a higher Law, even as this changing of the guards is joined with a moment of pleasure in dismissing the old form of the Law. Whether or not this moment of pleasure ought to be labeled funny remains debatable. As a moment of surprise and release, it shares basic structures with humor, but it seems much more fraught and unsettling than standard notions of something being "funny."

In the case of the *Vimalakīrti,* Śāriputra's consternation about the chairs is really a matter of etiquette that evokes concern for upholding Buddhist rules for conduct, the vinaya. Given that the next humiliation is about flowers adorning his body and the third is about eating after noon, it is clear the author has positioned Śāriputra as one who engaged Vimalakīrti with concerns from the standard law code that legislates basic aspects of the Buddhist community, with seating, flowers, and eating after noon being standard topics in the Buddhist vinaya. Thus Śāriputra's thoughts are shown to be focused on fulfilling the old version of the Law, and each time he seeks to fulfill the Law he meets with rebuke, and in that rebuke a higher form of

37. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 75, with minor changes; T.14.546a.5.

the Law is demonstrated in four ways. First, Vimalakīrti has direct access to Śāriputra's mind while the opposite is never allowed. Second, Vimalakīrti will provide a rhetoric that swallows the old version of the Law and leaves Śāriputra with no ground to stand on. Third, Vimalakīrti will rely on magic to simultaneously fulfill the old version of the Law even as he does so on a scale that completely ruptures the coordinates of the old legal form. Fourth, the narrative always credits Vimalakīrti with doing everything with ease whereas Śāriputra is forever awkward, stymied, and off balance.

Vimalakīrti's rebuke of Śāriputra only begins to find resolution when the conversation abruptly shifts as Vimalakīrti addresses Mañjuśrī about where he might find the best chairs in the universe. Based on Mañjuśrī's suggestion of enormous chairs from some far-off galaxy, Vimalakīrti magically imports enough of these chairs for every member of his audience. Of course, the next problem is that Śāriputra and the representatives of old-style tradition cannot sit in the chairs; they do not have the magical powers to change their forms in accordance with the chairs' size. This results in a second layer of humiliation as Vimalakīrti commands Śāriputra and the major disciples to sit down in the massive lion thrones. Śāriputra responds, "Layman, these seats are too tall and wide—we can't climb up in them."[38] Vimalakīrti's solution is to recommend that they pay obeisance to the buddha of the buddha land that provided the chairs and thereby gain access to their seats. That is, now Śāriputra is given an order to submit to the Law in the form of that distant buddha, all in order that he may fulfill the basic rules of etiquette in the vinaya and properly occupy his chair with the others.

Looked at holistically, this vignette accomplishes two major points besides simply humiliating Śāriputra. First, it shows that Vimalakīrti's rhetoric is not simply empty talk. He is able to perform in a way that completely outclasses traditional figures such as Śāriputra, and he has contacts with Mañjuśrī and other cosmic buddhas that allow him to engage powers on a scale that tradition had not imagined. Thus the vignette has framed Śāriputra's philosophic humiliation with a "prowess" humiliation that reinforces the philosophic rebuke but also essentially "proves" it by narrating visually irrefutable acts, such as the appearance of the cosmic chairs. Second, and this is probably already obvious, the vignette is translating philosophic sophistication into size. This is evident with the chairs, but it is emphasized in another manner that clarifies the thematic of containment and sets the stage for one of the narrative's preferred devices for shifting scenes—having Vimalakīrti gather up a world system and transport it elsewhere without the inhabitants' knowledge. Again, this motif seems to resonate with the objectives of the entire narrative, which likewise are focused

38. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 77; T.14.546b.18.

on shifting the reader's entire notion of the Real, even as nobody else seems to notice.

Commenting on these chairs, Śāriputra says, "Layman, I have never seen such a thing. A little room like this and still it can hold seats as tall and broad as these. And the city of Vaiśālī is in no way crowded or obstructed, nor are any of the towns or villages of Jambudvīpa or of the other of the four continents cramped or inconvenienced, or the palaces of the heavenly beings, dragon kings and spirits."[39] Vimalakīrti confirms the reality of this insertion of the chairs and the entirety of tradition in his little room and then gives a series of examples of how he and other bodhisattvas can work the Real so that what had seemed like a fixed plane of reality can be contained and manipulated within another zone of reality. Emphasizing the absolute transcendence of the bodhisattva's powers, Vimalakīrti offers this example:[40]

> "Or again, Śāriputra, this bodhisattva who dwells in Unthinkable Liberation *(zhu bu ke siyi jietuo)* can slice off the thousand-millionfold world, grasp it in the palm of his right hand like a potter's wheel, and toss it beyond the lands numerous as the sands of the Ganges, and the beings in that world will not know or realize where they have gotten to. The bodhisattva can then bring it back and put it in its original place, and none of the people will have any idea they have gone somewhere and come back, and the world will have the same shape as before."

This kind of vast transcendence over space, place, size, and closure is followed by another example in which Vimalakīrti asserts that such bodhisattvas also exercise transcendence over time, stretching or condensing it as they see fit. Of course, this domination of time is of particular interest in a text that seems interested in just such movements in time that allow the Buddha's "words" to move forward in time to the reader, via the timeless and perfect conduit of the text, even as the reader is moved backward to the font of tradition.

There is one other point to be made about this play of space and time. As the above passage reveals, the author is playing with a mimetic relationship between the state occupied by the bodhisattva with such world-overcoming powers and the alternative name of the *Vimalakīrti* text. Both are called "Unthinkable Liberation," and as the opening line makes clear, bodhisattvas who dwell in such a zone appear to have the rights to these magnificent powers. Also, by giving his text this secondary title, the author can cloak the manner in which players in the text are advocating the text that they are inhabiting. Thus to abide in "Unthinkable Liberation" means to abide both in this transcendental state and in the text. Of course, there is then the

39. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 78; T.14.546b.20.
40. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 78, with minor changes; T.14.546c.3.

deeper tie that the text hopes to produce in the reader—his or her sense of abiding in just such an "Unthinkable Liberation," thereby making the text both cause and effect of itself. And, similarly, such a seduced reader will find an analogue for himself in the text as these onstage actors speak of abiding in the "Unthinkable Liberation," just as the reader is.

Similarly, since the title "Unthinkable Liberation" is based on the negation "un-thinkable," the author can treat it as a quasi-place to dwell, despite having had Vimalakīrti berate Śāriputra for seeking a place to dwell. This takes us back to the problem, discussed in chapter 4 of this book, of interpreting a zone or object, which though identified as the opposite of something like a zone or an object still functions in parallel ways, even as it carries within it—via negativity—the charm of supposedly not being in the class of such items. Clearly, though place is being negated, one can still profitably inhabit the space of no-space and thereby gain wonderful powers and pleasures.

Śāriputra's humiliation over the seating problem is driven home as the narrator supplies a member of the internal audience to comment on the happenings. Mahākāśyapa, another traditional leader, on hearing this discourse in Vimalakīrti's house, sighs and says to Śāriputra:[41]

> "It is like someone displaying various painted images before a blind man when he cannot see them. In the same way when we Hearers hear this doctrine of the Unthinkable Liberation, we are all incapable of understanding it. If wise persons hear it, there will be none who do not set their minds on attaining highest enlightenment. But what of us, who are forever cut off at the root, who with regard to these Mahāyāna teachings have already become like rotten seed? When Hearers hear this doctrine of Unthinkable Liberation, they will surely all cry out in anguish in voices loud enough to shake the whole thousand-million fold world. But bodhisattvas should all accept this teaching with great joy and thanksgiving. For if there are bodhisattvas who put faith in this doctrine of Unthinkable Liberation, then none of the host of devils can do anything to them."

This passage is remarkable in the way it makes use of the internal audience for several agendas. First, it makes clear that old-style tradition has been completely cut off from being legitimate and is left howling at the moon. Key again is the fact that despite attending this teaching, the standard disciples are not benefited. In fact, the following line emphasizes that "thirty-two thousand offspring of the gods set their minds on the attainment of highest enlightenment,"[42] yet Śāriputra, Mahākāśyapa, and the other Hearers, aren't making any progress.

Second, the author has given a distinct emotional register for reading

41. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 80–81, with minor changes; T.14.547a.4.

42. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 81; T.14.547a.13.

Śāriputra's humiliation. In Mahākāśyapa's eyes, there is nothing funny here at all. Traditional figures, labeled Hearers, are shown crying in anguish at hearing this text, which again refers to itself with the secondary title, "Unthinkable Liberation." Third, Mahākāśyapa, even in light of his distress at this teaching, is turned into a promoter of the text. He encourages bodhisattvas to eagerly receive this teaching and promises that it will effect the task of keeping away demons, a promise that might seem a little mundane in the wake of what Vimalakīrti had just said about this discourse. So despite their endorsement of this new teaching, Śāriputra and the other traditional figures remain unimproved by this version of Truth, which they recognize but claim is beyond their purview. Naturally, this puts tradition in the awkward position of validating its own destruction for clearly Mahākāśyapa has been co-opted to announce tradition's estrangement from final truth, though he is relied on as a trustworthy narrator for the assessment of truth's locale.

Given that the text is offering these self-reflective appraisals of itself at this point, we need to appreciate how well designed the whole work is as it stretches from the initial setting with the two miracles by the Buddha into this zone at Vimalakīrti's house. Not only is there structural continuity, but thematically what is happening in Vimalakīrti's room matches well what the Buddha said in the opening chapter about the inadequacies of traditional disciples such as Śāriputra and Mahākāśyapa. In fact, given Mahākāśyapa's comments, we need to admit that there is a triple-layered narrative at work here that parallels the *Lotus Sūtra*'s structure. Thus the *Vimalakīrti* begins with a narrative describing a teaching scene but then breaks off into mini-narratives from the disciples and bodhisattvas who are at the teaching site. These excursions lead off into Vimalakīrti's room where teachings are given *and* received by the internal audience, who comment on them in a manner that reaffirms and underscores what was previously staged in the opening narrative zone. The teaching at this offstage site then is returned to the Buddha, who ratifies it and further legitimizes it with another historic excursion legitimizing textual transmission and then almost literally hands the text, as text, to the reader.

Looked at for its assumption in developing and negotiating between zones of the law, it is worth pointing out that the author is acutely aware of defining his reader's responses and develops a single thematic by combining action and response in these various zones of the Law, which, like the other sūtras considered above, are then consolidated into the Law about receiving the Law in textual form. In fact, given how the narrative explains the recovering of truth from Vimalakīrti's room through Vimalakīrti's gathering up of the entire audience in his right hand, we might wonder if the entire plot of the text is only thinkable with textuality as a handy analogy for the movement of language between zones of creation and consumption. That is to say, the staging of the play seems to move truth forward, scene by

scene, with the same efficiency of the textual transmission of language designed to move from author to reader. Of course, the total, and shameless, manipulation of Mañjuśrī, Śāriputra, Vimalakīrti, and the Buddha to play out the narrative's will only would occur once the realm of textuality opened up and authors felt free enough of received tradition to create "living" replicas of these figures who could be manipulated as needed.

BIG NOTHING AND THE BASIS OF COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the seventh chapter, Mañjuśrī, in a question that seems to echo the *Diamond Sūtra,* asks Vimalakīrti, "How does the bodhisattva regard living beings?"[43] Vimalakīrti launches into a long discourse on the phantomlike nature of living beings. Along the way, Mañjuśrī, as usual, only asks perfectly composed leading questions and does not respond to any of the answers. Mañjuśrī, in short, is nothing but a rhetorical device for the author to put definitions into the mouth of Vimalakīrti. What appears to be accomplished in this exchange is again much like the work of the *Diamond Sūtra.* The reader is bombarded with lists of impossible combinations that defy logic and the standard forms of tradition. In fact, many of these phrases are constructed from extending standard Buddhist lists by one term, thereby breaching the normal lines of closure that define the Buddhist world. Hence early on in his litany, Vimalakīrti recommends that living beings be viewed as "a fifth great element" or the sixth *skandha* when all Buddhists would know that there are only four great elements and five *skandhas.* Thus the author has Vimalakīrti manipulate recognized categories to produce that sense of rupture and extension into some unknown zone that he alone is comfortable speaking of. Naturally, the reader is left feeling flummoxed and out of his depth.

Abrogating established categories continues as Vimalakīrti takes up Mañjuśrī's next question, which, too, seems parallel to the template articulated at the beginning of the *Diamond Sūtra:* "If the bodhisattva looks on beings in this way, how can he treat them with compassion?"[44] Vimalakīrti builds a long answer to this question by postulating a seemingly endless variety of compassions built by combining compassion with other Buddhist lists and categories. Thus he gives the reader a "compassion of tranquil extinction," a "compassion unburning," a "compassion free of contention," a "compassion nondualistic" and so on. As in so many of Vimalakīrti's expositions, the author seems to delight in giving him a superabundance of verbiage that works to overwhelm the reader with its plenitude and its extravagant traversing of all sorts of Buddhist lists and dogmatic categories.

43. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 83; T.14.547a.29 ff.
44. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 84; T.14.547b.13.

For instance, what exactly are those various kinds of compassion that Vimalakīrti is shown speaking of? Their actual content and particularities are of little interest to the text, and certainly there is no attempt to offer them to the reader as particular practices. Instead it is the ring of these odd coinages and their accumulated sense of presence that seem to matter. These lists and their reordering of Buddhist categories are virtuoso performances pointing, it would appear, to their performer and not to particular referents. Thus there are good reasons for seeing that even these supposedly more philosophic sections are performative set pieces arranged, not to convey information per se, but to structure the reader's reaction to the entire text. Thus the hugeness and unthinkability that are regularly attributed to Vimalakīrti and his version of Buddhism appear tool-like and altogether limited in the author's hand, since he creates that image and wields it with precision in his effort to seduce the reader into accepting the text as real tradition.

Obviously, once we consider unthinkability as a narrative tool we have invited reflection on a range of fascinating topics, including the possibility that the radical unthinkability of reality, as the author sees it and as he assumes his reader will see it, is being employed to draw author qua text and the reader together. In this light, it clearly is not that unthinkability will render the text's agenda void and impossible, or that such impossibility will ruin the reader's taste for the Law and for the Lawgiver. Quite the contrary, the basic impossibility of describing reality, a fact widely discussed in traditional Buddhism, has now been extracted and turned into a kind of carefully revealed black hole that consumes prior theories of the Real only to make new ones. Unavoidably, then, we need to consider that the author had a sense for the limits of any symbolic order and cleverly demonstrated those limits in such a way as to reconstruct them. Thus, as in the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra,* total impossibility comes as a domesticated and domesticating narrative-item that can be relied on to destroy, create, and seduce.

Moreover, this black hole of impossible designation is, as in those other works, turned into the basis of patriarchal truth, appearing as the most fecund place to rebuild tradition and construct at least imagined community if not real community. Hence, in the end, all of Vimalakīrti's negations flow into the construction of the patriarchal transmission. And, again, the Law and finding one's "home" in and through the Law seem to emanate from the zones of darkness and impossibility that negation produces, even as they more rightly ought to be identified as emanating from the narrative. The major difference in reading in this literary manner, though, is that we begin to appreciate not "the black hole of the impossibility of being," which other modern commentators seem endlessly delighted by, but rather the much more interesting human effort to work with that impossibility and even build community on "its back."

THE GODDESS—A CAMEO APPEARANCE

The flow of the discussion between Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti is broken when the narrative turns with the same flimsy phrase that it has used for other transitions, "at this time," to introduce an altogether new figure, "a heavenly being, a goddess."[45] This goddess, who remains nameless, manifests herself for Vimalakīrti's audience in response, the narrative informs us, to the exposition of the Law that was under way. Thus she, too, is an effect of the onstage performance, and her own performance will serve to validate Vimalakīrti's discourse. In particular, she gives testimony to the eight "rare and unprecedented phenomena" that are found in Vimalakīrti's room. These rare phenomena even include the detail that all the buddhas jointly occupy Vimalakīrti's room when he thinks of them, a detail that will return when near the end of the text we learn that the presence of the text will confer a parallel boon.

Her arrival is marked by flowers falling on the other members of the onstage audience, flowers that oddly stick to the disciples and not to the bodhisattvas. The unspoken problem here, which the author is assuming the reader will immediately appreciate, is that Buddhist monks are forbidden to adorn their bodies with flowers or jewelry, and thus her flowery arrival has suddenly put the disciples in a state of illegality vis-à-vis the rules of the vinaya. A struggle of supernatural powers then ensues in which Śāriputra and the other disciples try to brush off the flowers but to no avail. Asked by the goddess for his motivation in attempting to remove the troubling flowers, Śāriputra says, "Such flowers are not in accordance with the Law *(bu rufa)*, that's why I try to brush them off."[46] The goddess responds with a teaching that castigates Śāriputra for misinterpreting the Law.

In rhetoric that seems largely indistinguishable from Vimalakīrti's, she argues that the real Law is about avoiding distinctions, and thus one must, in particular, apply the Law to the Law. As she says, "If one who has left the household life to follow the Buddha's Law makes such distinctions, *that* is not in accordance with the Law. One must be without distinctions to be in accordance with the Law."[47] Clearly, we are back to the standard format of writing a higher form of the Law that takes the lower form of the Law to task with the content of the Law now turned on the form of the Law as object. Too, as in the *Diamond Sūtra,* this doubling of the Law is left unannounced and unexplained, making it seem that the goddess's new version of the Law is nothing but a restatement of the Law as it was originally given. Thus as her comments include reference to leaving "the household life to follow the

45. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 86; T.14.547c.23.
46. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 87; T.14.547c.27.
47. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 87; T.14.548a.1.

Buddha's Law" there is a clear suggestion of continuity with older strains of Buddhist discourse and practice, and yet they are being fully overcome and rewritten by the goddess's definition of the Law of nondistinction. The obvious irony is that though the goddess is arguing that the Real version of the Law is about eschewing distinction, just this quality of nondistinction is being used to distinguish high and low versions of the Law.

The goddess and Śāriputra then debate a number of points about the irreality of time, about Śāriputra's supposed achievements, about language and writing(!), and about the Three Vehicles and so on. What seems undeniable in this section is that the goddess is playing Vimalakīrti's role—she distinctly appears as a kind of female double for him. Throughout her discussion, Vimalakīrti does not intrude, and she carries on the debate in exactly the same terms that he had used, never contravening the principles that he had established in his prior statements. To justify her stunning eloquence, the narrator adds that she has been living in Vimalakīrti's room for twelve years, the standard length of time for apprenticeship in India, which would explain her prowess as simply the effect of the proper transmission of truth from master to disciple. Then, to again secure her authority at the end of her discussion, Vimalakīrti explains to Śāriputra that in the past she "made offerings to ninety-two million buddhas" and that she has "accepted the truth of birthlessness" and "she can show herself anytime she wishes to teach and convert living beings."[48] Thus it would seem that Vimalakīrti is endorsing her in terms that are quite close to those that the narrator used in introducing Vimalakīrti at the beginning of the second chapter.

Whereas the goddess performs in a way that mirrors Vimalakīrti in the first half of her exchange with Śāriputra, the second half, when she magically switches bodies with Śāriputra, works in a decidedly different manner. Śāriputra is distraught, and even more when he is helpless to recover his masculine form. Then, the goddess launches into a discussion of the insubstantiality of the distinction between male and female. Though this conversation soon moves into less gender-focused accounts of the unreality of living beings, I think that something rather dramatic has happened. Śāriputra has, essentially, been temporarily castrated. He has lost his masculinity, his oral authority in the debate, and his claim to Buddhist authenticity. With all forms of his prestige completely removed, and the vinaya turned against him in public humiliation (the flowers are still stuck on his robes), it is clear that the author has created in the goddess a figure who can completely hollow out Śāriputra qua tradition in a manner even more devastating than Vimalakīrti.

In considering the structural organization of her entrance and perfor-

48. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 92; T.14.548c.24 ff.

mance, it seems that she represents another segment in the telescoping of the text. In the first segment, the zone of the Buddha is left to move to Vimalakīrti's zone where the omniscient narrator assures us that they are entering a sanctified and legitimate zone. Once in that zone, the process is repeated as Vimalakīrti's zone is left for the goddess's, who continues Vimalakīrti's work but pushes it to new levels. The crucial question in framing the text's development in this telescoping manner is, What is gained by this movement of authority away from the Buddha? Why bother with this odd figure of Vimalakīrti and then this rather unlikely goddess who seems to be a virtual double of Vimalakīrti in female form who speaks the same language but humiliates Śāriputra in even more outrageous ways? The most comprehensive answer to this question has to be that both Vimalakīrti and the goddess are deployed to humiliate tradition in a way that might look rather untoward should it be performed by the Buddha or other figures recognized by the reader as being *in* tradition. Thus both figures are marked by being outside the purview of normal, traditionally recognized models of authority, even though the narrative clearly identifies them as authentically Buddhist in deeper ways.

As for functions, in the case of Vimalakīrti, he humiliates Śāriputra and the other disciples and "smaller" bodhisattvas in philosophic and magical ways that show their limitations and their distance from truth and power. Presumably, this humiliation is felt even more acutely by the reader because it is coming from one who is, at least partially, identified as a layman. That is, status reversal between laity and clergy is counted on to further condemn the old form of clergy. The goddess certainly continues in this vein but directs her humiliation of Śāriputra toward a more sensitive topic—gender. Thus, whereas Vimalakīrti is rarely shown interested in broaching the symbolism of masculinity and femininity, or in playing magical games to reverse them and upset Śāriputra's, or anyone's, gender, this is exactly what the goddess is made to do.[49] Quite literally, she is designed to go where no man can go, and this dangerous zone of unmanning Śāriputra is presented not to advance the cause of women, a topic hardly of any concern for the rest of the narrative, but to reinforce the charges against Śāriputra and old-school tradition.

Against this reading of her use for the narrative's polemic is the standard explanation of the goddess as evidence of Mahāyāna authors' higher appreciation for women's spirituality and their willingness to grant women exalted status in the Buddhist world. While it may be that the long-term effect of this episode may, in some cultures, have led in that direction, I think the logic of her encounter with Śāriputra and its place in the text sug-

49. There is one phrase in Vimalakīrti's poem where he mentions that a bodhisattva would appear as a woman to seduce those prone to lechery; see Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 102.

gest a rather different interpretation. First, on a very basic level, the text has no overall use for her. She disappears just as suddenly as she appears, and she never reappears to be granted a place in the reconfiguration of tradition that happens in the final three chapters of the text. Of course, this mixed message is basically the same treatment given to Vimalakīrti, so they both appear to be "disposable" figures within the arc of the narrative's agenda. Similarly, there are no other female actors in any of the other scenes in the text, which casts serious doubt on reading this section as revealing a feminist orientation. Then, too, feminist concerns never reappear in other zones in the text. And, perhaps most telling, the goddess does not have a name. This might seem trivial, but in Indian culture, which puts high value on names, this lack speaks to her vaporous and ultimately unimportant role as nothing more than the mouthpiece for the author's relentless assault on old-school tradition. To appreciate the carefully circumscribed nature of her attack, one only need imagine how different this passage would have looked if she had turned this gender rhetoric, and her magic, on Vimalakīrti or the Buddha.

This rupture in Śāriputra's male gender is not matched by anything else in the narrative.[50] There is nothing else so pointed and so marked by distress and horror. Śāriputra is completely distraught at losing his masculinity, and the narrative explicitly plays up that bewilderment. Thus if we agree that up to this point Śāriputra has been the character designed for the reader to most easily identify with—he is after all, the only one besides Mahākāśyapa whose emotions are noted—then the text is none too subtly threatening the reader with castration. The flow of the narrative event likely would make the reader reason: "Śāriputra couldn't hold his own against this kind of goddess, and given the power of her rhetoric and magic, I surely couldn't imagine doing any better." The conclusion of identifying with Śāriputra would certainly qualify for what I called the drain-plug effect in chapter 4—the text has created a form which threatens the reader with total loss, and this fear is directed toward staying on the "good side" of this new version of the Law.

There is also a more structural reason for reading the goddess in this manner. If it makes good sense to read Vimalakīrti as a figure essentially created to push tradition through the dialectic of negation and reconfiguration, then the goddess appears as a further extension of this principle. She, too, is a figure who will put tradition through its paces and then disappear as tradition is regrouped around the old authority figures who, though they are now pumped up with this hydrogen from the sphere of unthinkability,

50. There are good reasons to suspect that this story is a spinoff of the story of the nāga princess in chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sūtra,* which, too, contains a castration motif but in reverse: the princess loses her femininity in her encounter with the Law; see Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra,* pp. 185–89.

still hold many of their old boundaries. It is primarily because both the goddess and Vimalakīrti quietly disappear after their tasks are accomplished that they are best read not as proponents of rights and powers of laity and women, but rather as "hit-men" in the service of Mahāyāna authors who needed to create authority in a manner that most thoroughly discounted and disgraced the authority that had been imagined in the prior version of tradition.

To push this a step further, given that the final sections of the text will explain that the text itself is the reservoir of tradition and truth, I wonder if it might not be sensible to see both Vimalakīrti and the goddess as precedents for locating truth outside of tradition and in some unexpected vessel far from the figures of normal authority such as Śāriputra and the monastic tradition. In this reading, the goddess has extracted Śāriputra's authority, and his masculinity, and though at least his masculinity have been returned, his authority hasn't been and instead seems loose and liable to be lodged in some equally unexpected form.

In line with the alternating sequencing that marks these middle chapters, the humiliation of Śāriputra at the hands of the goddess abruptly returns to Mañjuśrī's questioning of Vimalakīrti. Thus, this interlude with the goddess seems all the more like a further extension of the telescope without any narrative effects—it was simply a deeper intrusion into the symbolic structures that supported the glory and authority of old-style tradition. This time Mañjuśrī questions Vimalakīrti about the Buddha Way *(fodao),* and Vimalakīrti gives a tantalizing account of recovering the value of desire and the passions. This passage is, arguably, quite risqué in the world of Buddhist logic. Vimalakīrti gets Mañjuśrī to agree that the "seeds of buddhahood" *(rulai zhong)* are only activated when planted in the fecund ground of those who still belong to this world.[51] This passage clearly valorizes those readers who judge themselves to be far from attaining the desirelessness that was the hallmark of the early disciples like Śāriputra. In response to this discourse, Mahākāśyapa is again given the role of validating the discourse and concludes:[52]

> "In this sense, Mañjuśrī, the common mortal *(fanfu),* responds with gratitude to the Buddha Law but the Hearer [the Hīnayānist] does not. Why do I say this? Because when the common mortal hears the Buddha Law, he can set his mind on attaining the unsurpassed way, determined that the Three Treasures shall never perish. But the Hearer may hear of the Buddha's Law and powers and fearlessness to the end of his life and yet never be capable of rousing in himself an aspiration for the Unsurpassed Way."

51. For this phrase "seeds of buddhahood," see Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 95; T.14.549a.28.
52. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 96; T.14.549b.16.

This passage uses tradition to annul tradition even as it creates a new figure—this "common mortal who hears the Buddha Law" who, presumably, represents the reader consuming this discourse. What the reader is learning at this point is that his role has been well provided for in the narrative and that he will triumph over the standard traditional receptacle of tradition, the Hearer, who cannot accept the narrative.

The key to the reader qua common mortal's success is, not surprisingly, the desire for this very discourse, which is clearly what Mahākāśyapa is saying is beyond the ken of the old-school disciples who mistakenly take the end of desire to be the goal of Buddhism. Thus the very thing that old-school disciples were known for—their mastery of desire—is taken now to be their most basic lack, the element that will assure them of forever remaining strangers to truth. On the plane of the narrative, it would seem that the author is "getting at" the reader by showing him how truth and tradition cannot get at the traditional figures who would have been expected to have received truth and tradition. Moreover, it is exactly on the line that formerly demarcated the early disciples from "common mortals" that truth will be granted. Thus the prior markers of truth's ownership—the end of desire and the end of one's identity as a common mortal—are now taken to be markers of eternal failure. This, in effect, translates into the following two-part meta-law: wherever the law worked before, there it will work no more; and if you accept this new law about the (old) law, you'll win what the old law offered. Thus, as usual, the reader is being offered a quid pro quo exchange much like those found in the three other sūtras: produce desire and awe for this discourse, through seeing it as the legitimate, living (i.e., unconstructed, nonliterary) form of the Law, and you will in turn be declared the crucial node where tradition legitimately reproduces itself.

What is even more interesting to consider is that desire is now being promoted, not as some inherent part of a Mahāyāna platform, but as a necessary element for consuming and adopting Mahāyāna rhetoric that appears due to the medium that houses that rhetoric. The author seems fully aware that without the reader's desire his project will flop. And, given that restraint, he has taken the additional step of encoding desire into his version of the Law to facilitate just that desire for the text and its Law.

WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

Following a long poem given by Vimalakīrti and then a series of definitions for entering the gate of nonduality given by various unknown bodhisattvas that, together, take up the eighth and ninth chapters, the narrative returns to action closely related to the events as they are supposedly evolving on this

particular day in Vaiśālī. It seems that it's getting to be noon, and in accordance with the vinaya rule that monks are not to eat after noon, Śāriputra is wondering what they are going to do for lunch. Completely in keeping with the pattern first established in his concern over the seating, Vimalakīrti again reads Śāriputra's mind and uses Śāriputra's concern as a springboard for pushing the narrative into a distant perfect buddha land.

As with the magically huge chairs, Vimalakīrti will again import magical items, along with more confirmation of his legitimacy. Depending on this distant buddha land as a kind of staging area for bringing things into the Real of the narrative also establishes a flow of items and discourse that moves from that distant Pure Land and its pure form of Buddhism back up through the chain of segments to the Buddha who remains unmoved in the Āmra gardens and then ultimately to the reader. This time, in exercising his magical powers to move between zones, Vimalakīrti creates a phantom bodhisattva to retrieve some magical rice from a distant buddha land, "Many Fragrances." Unlike the huge chairs that are not important once they are brought back to the Buddha's zone, the rice functions as an important narrative element, and its enduring presence, albeit in the stomachs of the audience, allows the plot to more fully join these three zones: the Buddha Land of Many Fragrances, Vimalakīrti's room, and the Āmra gardens. Thus though this excursion to this distant buddha land functions as another telescope segment in the narrative, it moves in the opposite manner than the goddess's did. Whereas she worked to empty tradition, this segment will serve to fill tradition up, literally, with its magic rice and the Real form of tradition. Similarly, whereas she disappeared after giving her lines, the rice will stay onstage and will be returned to the Buddha's presence to participate in the validation of this version of the Law.

Before following the rice, though, let's note that in the coming account of the humiliation of Śāriputra over this lunch problem, we learn specific information that confirms the Buddha's statements in the first chapter about the two versions of worlds. As the phantom bodhisattva sent by Vimalakīrti engages the buddha of that Buddha Land of Many Fragrances, their conversation touches on a number of points that Śākyamuni was shown trying to convince Śāriputra of at the beginning of the text. In particular, bodhisattvas in that distant buddha land are so fully ensconced in that higher version of Buddhism that Śākyamuni had demonstrated with the toe trick that they cannot understand what the term "lesser doctrine," that is, old-style Buddhism, might mean. They ask their resident buddha, who explains that unlike their perfect situation, far away in a land called "Sahā" (our world) there is a buddha named Śākyamuni who "is manifesting himself in that evil world of the five impurities in order to expound the teachings of the Way to living beings who delight in a lesser doctrine. He has

a bodhisattva named Vimalakīrti who dwells in the Unthinkable Liberation and preaches the Law for the many bodhisattvas."[53]

This explanation by the distant buddha, in addition to once again confirming the narrative, inspires his resident bodhisattvas, and all nine million of them decide to set off for our world carrying the bowl of rice that Vimalakīrti has requested via the phantom bodhisattva. Echoing more explicitly the opening scene and the toe trick, the buddha of the Buddha Land of Many Fragrances requires the visiting bodhisattvas to rein in their bodily fragrances and to hide their real forms so that they do not ruin the schema of the degraded world that our resident Buddha Śākyamuni has designed for us. That buddha says to the exiting bodhisattvas:[54]

> "But draw in your bodily fragrances so that you will not cause living beings to be deluded or beguiled by them. And you should put aside your real form so that the persons in that country who are striving to become bodhisattvas will not feel intimidated or ashamed. . . . It is just that, since the buddhas wish to convert those who delight in the lesser doctrine, they do not reveal the full purity of the land."

This passage seems straightforward at first, but from the reader's point of view, it requires negotiating several versions of Buddhism. First, it serves to enhance that double vision of fake and Real Buddhism that was so crucial to construct at the beginning of the reading experience. But in returning to reaffirm this split-screen vision of two forms of Buddhism that the Buddha Śākyamuni had established in the first chapter, the narrative is also making the reader feel that he is gaining a perspective on that split in a manner that will encourage him to leave the old narrative for this higher narrative, even when in fact he is consuming yet a third narrative that is playing these two narratives off each other.

Moreover, the above passage contains another element seemingly designed to excite the reader's desire for this third narrative that explains the other two. That distant buddha requires the visiting bodhisattvas to hide their purity for fear that it will disturb the inhabitants of our land. Like the desire-producing construction in the Prodigal Son parable in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the reader's privileged access to this news from the other side—no one onstage seems privy to it—seems designed to stoke the reader's desire all the more since he now knows the Real and wishes that it would just be directly revealed to him without these dampening devices in place. Ironically, then, the text works at convincing the reader to shift to the Mahāyāna identity by showing him or her how the process has already been working at half speed. Or, in the language that I developed in my reading

53. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 114, with minor changes; T.14.552b.11.
54. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 115; T.14.552b.22.

of the Burning House parable, the real expedient means at work in the narrative is the revelation of the previously established use of expedient means. Clearly, the import of this passage is to show the reader how he has been worked on by this world's wily Buddha Śākyamuni, even as it is this revelation that leads the reader to hope for more direct access to this fullest version of tradition that is newly being proffered.

Once this rice has been delivered to Vimalakīrti's room in Vaiśālī, its wondrous aromas pervade Vaiśālī and all its inhabitants are "delighted in body and mind."[55] However, seeing only the single bowl of rice, Śāriputra and the other disciples are worried that it will not feed the assembly. Of course, this is but another occasion for the narrative to heap abuse on them, and this time it is the phantom bodhisattva who delivers the tough lines: "Do not try to use your Hearers' petty virtue and petty wisdom in appraising the immeasurable blessings and wisdom of the Tathāgata. Though the four seas run dry, this rice will never come to an end."[56]

As all the gathered beings ingest the rice, its powerful aroma fills the world, and this universalizing of pleasure is explicitly used as a metaphor for spreading the dharma. The bodhisattvas from the distant land explain, "The Tathāgata in our land does not employ words in his exposition *(wu wenzi shuo)*. He just uses various fragrances to induce heavenly and human beings to undertake the observance of the precepts."[57] Thus the narrative has conjured up a zone of perfect tradition where narrative is overtaken by the more direct and reliable medium of aromas. Of course, this zone is revealed here to more fully engage the reader's desire for the *Vimalakīrti*'s narrative by showing that communication could be otherwise and in fact should have been otherwise; it was just that this perfect form of aromic Buddhism could not be given to us because the inhabitants of our world were, and still are, so inferior.

After this account of our traditional form of Buddhism as seen from the sphere of perfect Buddhism in the Buddha Land of Many Fragrances, Vimalakīrti moves into an unusually clear and topical explanation of the two different styles of Buddhism that the reader is now quite acquainted with. In a fully developed speech, the author has Vimalakīrti state clearly that Buddhism, as it had been known until now, was just a crass and downgraded version of the pure, celestial form of Buddhism that all the visiting bodhisattvas thought was the only Buddhism extant. Thus Vimalakīrti explains that the precepts, the teachings of karma, bad rebirth, samara, and nirvana, are coarse and even vicious teachings given strictly in accord with the beastly level of the audience in our world. Concluding his speech, Vimalakīrti

55. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 115; T.14.552c.4.
56. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 116; T.14.552c.13.
57. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 117; T.14.552c.22.

resorts to animal analogies to explain the creation of traditional (read, "faux") Buddhism:[58]

> "These people who are difficult to convert have minds like monkeys. Therefore one must resort to various methods in order to control and regulate their minds. Only then can they be tamed and made obedient. It is like dealing with an elephant or horse that is wild and unruly. One must apply sharp blows, till it feels them in its bones, and then it can be tamed. And it is the same with these stubborn and strong-willed beings who are difficult to convert. Therefore one uses all sorts of bitter and piercing words, and then they can be made to observe the precepts."

The visiting bodhisattvas, who are the target audience of this speech, respond by claiming that all this is news to them:[59]

> "We have never heard of such a thing before! A World Honored One like Śākyamuni who conceals his immeasurable powers of freedom and preaches the Law in a manner that will please the mean in spirit in order to save and liberate all beings!"

This vignette again supports the opening toe trick, but it also makes clear that on either side of the divide between the two narratives being developed there is a lack of recognition. Thus these bodhisattvas are shown reacting to our form of Buddhism in a manner that mirrors Śāriputra's reaction when he saw the "real" buddha land version of Buddhism that these bodhisattvas know. The visiting bodhisattvas, for their part, appear uneducated in the many ways of Buddhism because, though they have the perfect form of Buddhism, they cannot imagine that Buddhism could be any other way.

Thus, though it might first appear that the narrative simply wants to get the reader to adjust his world-narrative from traditional Buddhism to this "perfect" form of Buddhism known to the visiting bodhisattvas, in fact, the narrative seems most intent on seducing the reader into the third narrative that sees both forms of Buddhism and, like Vimalakīrti, can inhabit both in one way or another. These remarks on the Buddha's extreme deformation of Buddhism in light of the beastly inhabitants of our world are extended with both the bodhisattvas and Vimalakīrti adding that bodhisattvas who "condescend" to be born in this land certainly get a tough row to hoe. After reading these passages, few believing readers could wish to remain identified with old-style Buddhism that has been cast in such a dark and dismal light, and yet they are also gaining an appreciation for the Buddha's patience with this bad form of Buddhism and the heroic value that attaches to those who function in this world knowing how fabricated and unsavory it

58. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 118; T.14.553a.12.
59. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 118; T.14.553a.16.

really is. Thus, like the other sūtras considered here, the actual subject-position tendered to the reader is construed largely in the appreciation of a gap between "Real" tradition and its traditional, degraded form. Thus, to be fully Mahāyāna, in the sense that both Śākyamuni and Vimalakīrti articulate, is not to simply lodge oneself in the perfect Tradition but rather to inhabit and *enjoy* just that space between Real and dastardly tradition.

Despite promoting the active participation in the two narratives of tradition, the differences between these two narratives are treated in a radically dualistic manner. Above, Vimalakīrti has veered into the simple Manichaean rhetoric of good and bad, even as he labels traditional Buddhism "bad" precisely because it takes good and bad too seriously. Or, to return to language that appeared around the goddess's speeches, Vimalakīrti's distinction of traditions is as distinct as any other distinction he can point to in the bad version of tradition that the text is trying to overcome. Equally clear, the text has veered off into a kind of hysteria of name calling where there clearly is no room for honorable opposition. Just as when the *Lotus Sūtra* warmed up in its promise of brutal punishments for those who would resist the narrative, here, too, the animal insults come piling out for those who will not side with the text's version of tradition.

What is even more damning of a reading that would take the entire text as an example of dangerous, nondualistic antinomianism is the following speech in which Vimalakīrti gives the ten good practices and the eight methods for bodhisattvas to practice in our world. Explaining that these practices are not found in perfect lands and that therefore they generate a million times more merit, Vimalakīrti gives a set of activities that are little different than those offered by old-school Buddhism. First, the Six Perfections are listed, but they are given in rather un-Mahāyānic forms and appear completely stripped of the hyped-up rhetoric that they had been spoken of in the earlier chapters. For instance, here one practices "wisdom which does away with stupidity."[60] The prosaic nature of bodhisattva practice is made even clearer in the following lines where Vimalakīrti advocates the eight methods of converting beings in our land. Here a range of self-humbling practices are listed, along with prohibitions against being envious of the alms that others might be collecting. Surely we now are a long way from Vimalakīrti's rebuke of Subhūti's attempt to collect alms in the second chapter. Arguably, we are close to being right back to a position not too different from Subhūti's or the other disciples'—the straightforward practice of Buddhism as it had been explained with the collection of alms, precepts, meditation, and so on.

Despite this section, which suggests that in terms of practice the text has

60. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 119; T.14.553a.25.

not prepared much to replace old-style tradition, there is a major hint about what the reorganization of authority might accomplish. In one of the eight practices that Vimalakīrti lists, he says that bodhisattvas "shall regard other bodhisattvas as though they were looking at the Buddha himself."[61] This line makes very clear that despite the replay of common Buddhist practices, authority and perfect presence are being redirected from the figure of the Buddha into one's colleagues. Thus one is to see one's compatriots, and be seen by them, as identical to the font of tradition—the Buddha. And to secure the ideological basis of this radical shift, a following line mentions, "When they hear a sūtra they have not heard before, they shall not doubt it, and they shall not dispute with or oppose the Hearers."[62] Apparently, the text is hoping to soften up the reader for new and unratified versions of tradition and is also inviting the reader to leave off debate with the Hearers regarding what is and is not to be regarded as traditional and authoritative Buddhism. In short, the text is offering itself as the authority for tradition with the added encouragement to the reader that he should find like-minded Buddhists to keep company with, seeing in them the Buddha and the essence of tradition.

STAGE FIVE: HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS

Once a satisfactory explanation of the two radically different versions of Buddhism has been reached, the narrative moves to rejoin Vimalakīrti's zone with the Buddha's. This rejoining is orchestrated by describing how back at the Āmra gardens, where the Buddha has been apparently inactive this whole time, the surroundings are spontaneously turning into a Pure Land. Except for this preparatory magic, the narrative, as usual, supplies no more causality for its flow than the standard "at this time *(shi shi)*." And yet, as the story unfolds in the eleventh chapter, it is clear that the narrative has reached a critical moment where it must now regather its telescoped segments and begin to consolidate, into one overview, the various narratives of Buddhism that it has generated. Moreover, whereas the Buddha had to perform the toe trick in the first chapter to manifest the Pure Land version of our world, the regathering of the narrative's zones naturally, and effortlessly, produces the same effect. This implies that the author is subtly signaling that the regathering of the visions displayed in the telescoped narrative, alone, ought to shift the appearance of the Real, thereby transforming the initially prosaic setting in the gardens into a Pure Land and offering the reader a template for his own work of regrouping these fantasies back into his symbolic world.

61. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 119–20; T.14.553b.4.
62. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 120; T.14.553b.4.

Despite the presence of grand bodhisattva figures in the returning entourage, the first conversation held at this reunion is between the Buddha and Śāriputra, as the Buddha requires Śāriputra to narrate what he has seen, an obvious redundancy given the Buddha's clairvoyancy established in the first chapter. Moreover, one would have thought that the Buddha would immediately engage Vimalakīrti, if Vimalakīrti was in fact the center of the story. Actually, a chapter will pass before the Buddha addresses Vimalakīrti, whereupon he will ask him only one question. Clearly, instead of negotiating an encounter between the Buddha and Vimalakīrti, the author arranges this chapter to have the Buddha address a number of issues regarding bringing these three zones together, a mediation that clearly is the telos of the text.

In an equally telling detail, Vimalakīrti's powers—now well established—are relied on to initiate the collapse of these zones. Whereas in the narrative's initial move away from the Buddha it was Mañjuśrī who led the assembly to Vimalakīrti's room, presumably on foot, now it is Vimalakīrti who leads tradition back to the Buddha—but now in an altogether miraculous manner. Fulfilling a prior description of how bodhisattvas perform grand "earth-moving" gestures, Vimalakīrti picks up the entire assembly of monks, bodhisattvas, chairs, and so on, in his right hand and carries them from his room to the Buddha. Accepting this hand-held version of tradition with its overpowering aromas and cosmos-tripping bodhisattvas, along with the humiliated and disenfranchised traditional disciples, the Buddha first receives the worship of the arriving bodhisattvas, whose devotion serves to reinscribe hierarchy and order in the text. In fact, the narrative specifies that it was first Vimalakīrti who bowed down to the Buddha, and circumambulated him seven times in accordance with Indian custom. The other bodhisattvas then perform the same salutation, followed by the disciples and the heavenly beings and so on.

Evidently, in this return to the zone of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the reader is to see that a new hierarchy of Buddhism is officially recognized by the presiding Buddha. In line with the text's highly selective application of negative rhetoric, this demonstration of hierarchy and order never comes under review for its dualism or its irreversibility. Notable, too, Mañjuśrī drops out of the narrative at this point, never speaking again as attention is turned toward discussions between the Buddha and the disciples who are instructed, along with the reader, in the ways that they ought to comprehend what they have "seen" and "heard" and how all that happened in Vimalakīrti's room was legitimate and trustworthy.

Once everyone is seated again, the Buddha turns to question Śāriputra, who now must account for what he has witnessed. "The Buddha said to Śāriputra, 'Did you see what these bodhisattvas, these great men, did through

their freely exercised supernatural powers?' "[63] As usual in these early Mahāyāna sūtras, what was narrated in a prior section by an omniscient narrator is reconfirmed by a figure produced in the narrative who vouches for what he *saw.* Ironically, then, the author has made his rhetorical structures appear more real through the use of yet another rhetorical structure. In his recap, Śāriputra's humiliation and estrangement are again announced as Śāriputra confesses his failure: "World Honored One, what I saw them do was incredible. My mind cannot comprehend it, it is beyond my fathoming."[64] This conversation is interrupted by Ānanda, who is wondering about the aroma: "This fragrance I smell is like nothing I have ever known. What fragrance is this?"[65]

Obviously this question about the fragrance will require the Buddha's zone to come to terms with what has happened in the other zones established in the narrative, since the narrative is allowing that this aroma passed, intact, from one zone to the other two. Explaining the arrival of this wonderful and unknown aroma in the Āmra gardens then becomes a clever way for the narrative to connect all three zones: the Buddha's, Vimalakīrti's, and the distant Buddha Land of Many Fragrances. Each zone represents different forms of knowledge, which at first were limited in their views of each other but in these closing chapters are gradually coming to be folded into one full narrative that will, in the end, be offered to the reader.

As for answering Ānanda's question, the Buddha tells him that this fragrance comes from the pores of bodhisattvas, and yet Śāriputra adds that it comes from his pores as well. Śāriputra's hasty statement is curious because it is one of the few signs that he has in fact been moved to accept Vimalakīrti's discourse. Up to this point, Śāriputra has simply suffered Vimalakīrti's rhetoric, or the goddess's, and has not responded with anything but shame and lament. Ānanda, his interest now fully piqued, inquires again about the origins of this aroma and learns from Vimalakīrti about the magical rice that was brought from the distant Buddha Land of Many Fragrances. In explaining to Ānanda the properties of this rice, Vimalakīrti adds a new form of legality that turns this rice into something like an internal litmus test. He explains that the rice emits this fragrance until it is digested and that digestion does not fully occur until the eater has made progress on the Mahāyāna path.

This fragrance trope is not developed much more than this, but the narrative appears to offer the rice as a metaphor for the consumption of Vimalakīrti's teaching. Śāriputra, on whom all attention is currently cast, has attended the teaching and received the rice, as well as the challenge to per-

63. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 122; T.14.553b.26.
64. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 122; T.14.553b.27.
65. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 122; T.14.553b.29.

form in a Mahāyānic manner in order to digest his rice. Presumably, the reader is set in a parallel position: the reader, too, has in effect attended the teaching and, though not having ingested the rice, knows of the expectations placed on those who come away from the teachings and return to the more mundane version of tradition: they must properly digest the teaching in order to properly digest the rice, and both digestions are marked as positive acts as they give off this wonderful aroma.

Regardless of how we read the reader's expected consumption of this analogy for the consumption of Vimalakīrti's teachings, we can see that the author has cleverly supplied something apparently real that will persist as the narrative changes settings. That is, in the narrative, the author has constructed the rice as a prenarrative reality that moves between narrative zones and which requires actors onstage to generate narratives that begin to explain and combine these zones. This implies, again, the author's awareness of the productive layerings in his narrative and the need for the narrative to prove that it can jump frames in order that it may accomplish its more basic task of jumping frames from being another Mahāyāna text to being the Real for the reader who faithfully consumes it.

At this critical juncture when Śāriputra's body becomes the focal point for collecting the three zones and legislating their "digestion," the Buddha takes over the discourse to explain to all present that just as some buddhas use light or fragrance to do "buddha-work" *(foshi),* other buddhas use similes. He says, "There are some [buddha lands] where voices, spoken words *(yuyan),* or written words *(wenzi)* are used to do buddha-work."[66] This detail might appear unimportant at first, but by specifically having the Buddha endorse written words, it seems that the author has written a script for the Buddha that includes the author's own exculpation. The Buddha is specifically telling Ānanda, and the reader, that a whole range of items not previously associated with the Buddha can be expected to do a buddha's work—light, aroma, even written words—an explanation that we had been partially prepared for once the visiting bodhisattvas had explained that dharmic "discourse" in their resplendent buddha land of Many Fragrances was conducted via aromas and not with words. Standing back from this particular line, it appears that the teachings and deeds of the historical Buddha are getting redefined and redistributed in items and zones that need to be justified by writing just these kinds of speeches for the Buddha in which *he* justifies, among other things, writing itself, even though he is never brought into direct contact with writing.

The Buddha's speech on the various modes of buddhas' work continues to explore the vastness of the buddhas' projects but then curves around to

66. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 124, with minor changes; T.14.553c.25.

belittle Ānanda and to again drive a wedge between old-school Buddhism and the one being revealed here. Taking up Ānanda's talent for remembering what the Buddha had taught, a talent for which he had been famous, the Buddha denies him this glory, claiming that in fact all this is beyond the scope of his talents. Ānanda acquiesces to this loss of his status, saying, "From now on, I will never dare think of myself as a person who has 'heard many of the teachings.'"[67] Though the Buddha encourages him not to be discouraged, he further hollows out the standard icons of tradition:[68]

> "All the deepest places in the sea can still be fathomed, but the meditation, wisdom, power to retain the teachings, eloquence, and all the various merits of the bodhisattvas are immeasurable. Ānanda, you and the others had best forget about the actions of the bodhisattvas. This manifestation of supernatural power that Vimalakīrti has just now shown us no Hearer or Pratyekabuddha could equal in a hundred thousand kalpas, no matter how he might exhaust his powers of transformation."

With old-school tradition thoroughly cut out of true tradition, the narrative moves to take care of a lingering problem in negotiating the unification of the three zones. The visiting bodhisattvas from the Buddha Land of Many Fragrances had at first belittled the teaching in our land but now, presumably after seeing Śākyamuni at work, change their minds and realize his genius and fortitude. They say, "World Honored One, when we first saw this land, we thought of it as base and inferior, but now we regret our error and have put such thoughts out of our minds."[69] This change in heart, then, is an occasion for Śākyamuni to address bodhisattva teachings to them before they exit to return to the Land of Many Fragrances. Of course, too, it is an important step in that process of getting the various narrative zones to ratify each other and to admit to the initial limitations in their respective perspectives.

Moreover, bringing these visiting bodhisattvas into the Āmra gardens provided the pretext for having the Buddha, finally, give supposedly undistorted teachings on the higher version of tradition. Without these bodhisattvas on hand to serve as a suitable audience, the Buddha, according to his earlier assessment of the bestial inhabitants of our world, would not dare to engage in this kind of direct teaching. In line with my argument about "the narrative about the two different Buddhist narratives," what I am calling undistorted teaching is actually just that rather complicated third narrative that supports, and is supported by, the other two. As the Buddha lectures the visiting bodhisattvas, they in fact learn a new Buddhism that was

67. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 125; T.14.554a.19.
68. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 125; T.14.554a.23.
69. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 125–26; T.14.554a.28.

not included in their perfect form of Buddhism. What they learn is the tension between the two narratives of good and bad Buddhism, and in this awakening they begin to realize the depth of the complication of moving between them. And, as the above quote attests, the visiting bodhisattvas end up conferring on Śākyamuni a greater respect than their own buddha in the Land of Many Fragrances deserved, since, in fact, they realize that Śākyamuni's buddha-work is a good bit more involved and trying than the buddha-work of their land.

At this juncture the visiting bodhisattvas are essentially conferring on Śākyamuni the honor of teaching an even higher version of Buddhism than what had first been heralded as perfectly pure Buddhism. Śākyamuni, since he patiently feeds the inhabitants of our world bad Buddhism while waiting to give them Real Buddhism, is in fact performing in an altogether more exemplary manner. Once these bodhisattvas have played out their role of receiving and ratifying these "overview" teachings that meld the visions of the two narratives of Buddhism into one that is judged supreme, they finally return to their zone.

As they exit at the end of the eleventh chapter, the narrative gives them a line that reveals that however perfect Buddhism might be in the Land of Many Fragrances, these bodhisattvas have not really been aware of the higher narratives that govern Buddhism throughout the cosmos. Having been delighted by the Buddha's teachings, and strewing flowers around as an offering to the Buddha and this sūtra-teaching *(gongyang yu fo ji ci jingfa),* they "sighed at having heard what they had never heard before, explaining, 'Śākyamuni Buddha knows how to employ expedient means in a truly skilful manner.' "[70] Obviously, comparing these bodhisattvas to the Buddha or to Vimalakīrti shows what limited access they have to the very overview that the text is trying to generate in the reader's imagination. As I just mentioned, the supposedly perfect form of Buddhism in their land is far from being the final form that the text is most interested in. Instead, the visiting bodhisattvas are deployed as placeholders in the long dramatization of tradition overcoming itself by creating a higher version of itself and then folding that higher form back into its prior forms, with that resulting fusion declared the highest form of tradition.

The twelfth chapter begins with the now-weary conjunction "at this time," as the text now devotes a chapter to fully bringing Vimalakīrti's and the Buddha's zones into contact, even if this contact is kept to a minimum and is treated very gingerly. Their contact, in fact, is limited to the Buddha asking Vimalakīrti one question, What is the nature of the Buddha's body?—a topic that has, on and off, been central to various discussions in the text.

70. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 129; T.14.554c.24.

Vimalakīrti's long answer, however, is side-tracked as Śāriputra intrudes to ask about Vimalakīrti's past lives. Vimalakīrti dodges the question and retorts that birth and death are fictitious so there is no point in debating the matter. The Buddha, however, steps in to give Vimalakīrti a pedigree that leads back to the distant buddha land named Wonderful Joy where the Buddha Akṣobhya resides. This mini-history then opens up as yet another opportunity for Vimalakīrti to show off his magical abilities—again he performs the "earth-moving" gesture by gathering up that distant world in his right hand and delivering it to the audience in the Āmra gardens, creating awe and wonder.

This demonstration resolves as the Buddha then makes Śāriputra again speak to what he *saw* in Vimalakīrti's performance. Oddly enough, in response to this question, Śāriputra initiates a much longer comment that begins by shifting from the miracle he just witnessed to recounting the general benefits that he gained back in Vimalakīrti's room. As usual, Śāriputra is used to turn the omniscient narration into firsthand narration, and he locks that narration into the space between a trusted disciple and the Buddha, presumably thereby sealing it with truth and trustworthiness. His long comment, his longest in the text, though, leads in an altogether different direction. Apparently stepping completely out of character, Śāriputra begins to speak authoritatively about the future reception of the text. Suddenly, he has been positioned as a pivot spokesperson who belongs inside the narrative and yet can announce a variety of legalistic definitions structuring and encouraging future reception and consumption of the text.

At this point in the narrative, there is a sea change: the narrative's agenda shifts from proving Vimalakīrti's consummate powers and cosmic authority to making those powers available to readers provided that they consume the narrative "legally," or as it is put in the text, "in accordance with the Law" *(rufa)*. From this time onward, Vimalakīrti will disappear and say nothing more. In fact, henceforth there will be no more negative dialectics as the text focuses on marketing itself and comparing itself, favorably, with all other forms of Buddhist practice. Apparently, with the work of negation accomplished, it is time to gather the fruits of that overcoming, and this requires shifting to different personae who will be in charge of normalizing and domesticating that negativity. Śāriputra explains the powers and promises that the narrative and text qua object will have:[71]

> "World Honored One, I and the others have happily acquired excellent benefits, being able to see this person and to approach and make offerings to him. And other living beings, either now while the Buddha is here or after he has passed away, if they hear this sūtra, will acquire excellent benefits as well.

71. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 135; T.14.555c.19.

> And how much more so if, having heard it, they believe and understand it, accept and uphold it, read and recite it, expound it to others, and practice it as the Law directs. One who holds the sūtra in hand *(you shou de shi jingdian zhe)* has thereby acquired the storehouse of the jewels of the Law. If one reads and recites it, understands and expounds it, and practices it as the Law directs, the buddhas will guard and keep in mind that person. And if there are those who give alms to such a person, let it be known that this is giving alms to the Buddha. If there are those who copy and preserve these sūtra scrolls *(jingzhuan)*, let it be know that the Tathāgata will visit their rooms."

Without a doubt this passage reveals that the author is quite concerned with his narrative as a physical text and has created speech in his characters to guide the reader in receiving both the content of the narrative and its physical presence. Thus the author has Śāriputra speak to the benefits of physically receiving the text "in hand" and the protection that will be bestowed on those who read it and preserve it in its scroll form. Also in line with the way the author has structured his seduction of the reader, what is simply and boldly stated here by Śāriputra will be "proven" by a complicated history of the Buddha that will take up the final two chapters.

Before considering the content of these final two chapters, I want to emphasize that this notable fold in the text's rhetoric matches the narrative's to-and-fro movement through space. As the narrative action left the Buddha and went to Vimalakīrti's room, the negative rhetoric designed to overcome all prior teachings and perspectives was the focus. Once the narrative returns to its place of origin, those topics disappear and are replaced by overriding conservatism and value-claims that direct the reader's interest to the medium that supports these conversations—the text itself. Thus the author now is carefully bundling up the violent authority produced in the middle section in order to capitalize on the tradition-smashing transcendence of Vimalakīrti so that the reader can be offered the standard Mahāyāna sūtra package: accept this narrative as true, and you will receive, in return, the essence of tradition and the identity of being a bodhisattva destined to replicate the truth-father.

As I argued from the outset of this chapter and in chapter 1, the reason that the negation of tradition comes with the possibility of recovering it is that to stand in a position to negate tradition requires having a higher or more extensive form of authority that can "oversee" little tradition and know that it is but a defiled sliver of Real tradition.

FINAL TRUTH: ANOTHER REVISED LINEAGE FOR ŚĀKYAMUNI

Just as the twelfth chapter ended with Śāriputra's dramatic character shift and a notable shift in tone toward conservatism, the thirteenth chapter continues in the vein of canalizing the narrative's ideological gains but now by

introducing the figure of Indra, lord of the gods. With this impressive figure as his interlocutor, the Buddha tells of his distant past in a way that would have surprised most traditional readers aware of the other more established histories that explained the Buddha's lineage running through Dīpaṃkara and the other buddhas listed in the set of seven and twenty-eight buddhas. The autobiography that the Buddha is made to give in the *Vimalakīrti* seems to make allusions to several other sets of writing, a fact worth noting for gauging the emergence of a literary culture of borrowing and recycling that appears evident in this early strata of Mahāyāna writing.[72] In the wake of explaining the vastly greater powers of text-worship over relic-worship, Śākyamuni says to Indra:[73]

> "You should understand that if there are good men and good women who, on hearing this Sūtra on Unthinkable Liberation, believe, understand, accept, uphold, read, recite, and practice it, their blessings will be even greater than those such person [who practice stūpa worship described in the preceding paragraph]. Why? Because the enlightenment of the buddhas is born from this sūtra."

In this self-promoting passage, which refers to itself by its secondary name, Unthinkable Liberation, the narrative is setting itself up, like the other three sūtras covered in this book, as that which both ontically precedes the buddhas and that which allows those who live in the time after the death of the buddha access back to his essence and presence. Thus the narrative is conferring on itself that timeless quality of being both the parent of the buddhas and the product of this particular buddha. And this ability to transcend time is again evident when it is claimed that this text is the item that is also offered to future beings who, wishing to join the buddha-legacy, are advised to take the text as the conduit back to recovering a connection with the Buddha, a conduit that will function so much better than the relics did.

The out-of-time quality of the text, as well as the practical implications of a cult of the text, become clearer as the Buddha embarks on an autobiography that seems to mimic two stories in the *Lotus Sūtra* both of which work at rewriting the Buddha's lineage and are devoted to convincing the reader of lineages built on text transmission. Likely borrowing the character and plotline of the Medicine King Buddha from chapter 23 of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the Buddha is made to once again reconstruct his lineage for the benefit of promoting a Mahāyāna sūtra as the cause of tradition. Very closely in line with the structure of the story of the Medicine King Buddha in the *Lotus*

72. For a discussion of literary parallels between the *Vimalakīrti* and other Mahayana texts, see Jonathan A. Silk, "Why Has the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Been So Popular?" unpublished manuscript (2004).

73. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 137; T.14.556a.29.

Sūtra, where a new style of offering titled "true dharma offering" *(zhenfa gongyang)*[74] is defined, the *Vimalakīrti* version of the story is focused on transmission and evolves from negotiating a new lineage for the Medicine King Buddha and a sage-king named Jeweled Parasol. The result of their engagement is a composite lineage that merges an at-home patriarchy and a buddha-patriarchy, and gives birth to a new tool—this text—that will allow the reader access to the buddha patriarchy. Of course, this theme of interweaving patrilines of different levels and zones matches quite closely the overall work of chapter 23 in the *Lotus Sūtra,* just as it appears as the widest agenda apparent throughout the initial chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra.*[75]

In the *Vimalakīrti* the basic plot of this mini-history begins as Śākyamuni describes a time countless eons ago when there was a sage-king Jeweled Parasol who led his thousand sons in worshiping the Medicine King Buddha for five eons, providing him with the material goods that he required. At the end of this time, he commanded his sons to continue this practice: "You too should make offerings to the [Medicine King] Buddha with the same deeply searching mind as I have shown."[76] Thus the story begins with a transmission of the will-to-sacrifice to a buddha, a transmission of discipline and devotion that occurs at home but seals the connection between lay donors and a perfect Buddhist recipient—the Medicine King Buddha. Then, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the plot takes an unexpected turn when this parallel track of patriarchs is explicitly interwoven to create new opportunities for everyone to gain entrance into the buddha-family.

Before this shift in levels is inaugurated, we learn that this initial structuring of father-son transmission from Jeweled Parasol to his thousand sons was effective, with the sons performing as expected, and yet simple success was disrupted by a certain son wishing to make a better sacrifice, a trope also found in the *Lotus Sūtra* version of the Medicine King Buddha. In the *Vimalakīrti,* it is just this extraordinary desire to be more "lawful" that will result in the emergence of a supposedly higher form of devotion to the Law, a form that brings with it the command for a complete revolution in patron-priest relations. Thus, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the author of the *Vimalakīrti* is trying to make his rewriting of the Law look like the effect of the desire to fulfill the Law, hence the narrative is propelled by the desires of this especially devoted and filial son.

Temporarily ignoring the other 999 sons, the narrative of the *Vimalakīrti* turns to focus on just that one preternaturally devoted son named Moon

74. T.11.53b.11 ff.

75. For a discussion of this chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra,* see my "Homestyle Vinaya and Docile Boys in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7, no. 1 (spring 1999): 5–50.

76. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 138; T.14.556b.10.

Parasol.[77] In response to Prince Moon Parasol's longing for a better offering, the narrative introduces a heavenly being who explains to him that "dharma offering is the finest of all offerings" *(fa zhi gongyang sheng zhu gongyang)* and that he ought to ask the Medicine King Buddha about how to perform it.[78] Keeping in mind that *dharma* means, among other things, "Law," "dharma offering" really means "offering of the Law," thereby revealing that the text is stepping into a kind of circularity with the Medicine King Buddha oddly explaining, as his law, an offering that is again about giving the Law. As we will see, this circularity is precisely what the text needs as it begins to endorse itself as the final form of tradition (dharma), supported, too, by other laws that it articulates about how that final form of the Law is to be engaged, exchanged, and reproduced.

Moreover, once this definition of offering has veered away from standard patron-priest relations that had been in force between King Jeweled Parasol and the Medicine King Buddha, the narrative turns to have the Buddha tell a history of his past in which the will to engage in textual transmission appears as the crucial element in the lineage that supposedly gave birth to Śākyamuni and which can, in turn, give birth to the bodhisattva identity of those who commit themselves to trafficking in Mahāyāna texts. Of course, since the author has relied on heavenly beings and voices throughout his narrative to advance the story through difficult zones, we presumably ought to see this moment as one such structurally difficult juncture. Also, in the details that follow we will see that this kind offering, though useful for securing a cult of the text, is structurally rather unstable in the story.

Following the god's directions, Prince Moon Parasol goes to the Medicine King Buddha where he receives an unusual explanation of "dharma offering." It turns out that in a very long and involved explanation of this offering, the answer to Prince Moon Parasol's question about the nature of dharma offering is this: the best way to offer to the buddhas is to not offer to them at all but to traffic in Mahāyāna texts, and that this is what was meant by "dharma offering." Without explicitly using the category "Mahāyāna sūtras," the Medicine King Buddha describes these "profound texts" in a way that leaves no doubt that the author intends to limit "dharma offering" to trafficking in Mahāyāna texts. He describes them as those wonderful and pure texts that are difficult to believe and, among other things, "hold the bodhisattvas' dharma storehouse" *(pusa fazang suoshe)* and lead to

77. With the parasol motif in his name and in his father's name, the text is presumably echoing the opening scene in which the five hundred sons of rich men offered parasols to the Buddha.

78. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 138; T.14.556b.14. The phrase that I am translating as "dharma offering," *fa zhi gongyang,* is slightly different from the phrase in Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra: fa gongyang.*

the accomplishment of the Six Perfections.[79] Having identified these texts as the essence of tradition that causes those who accept them to perfectly manifest the cardinal virtues of the tradition, or at least the virtues that this particular Mahāyāna proponent supports, the Medicine King Buddha says:[80]

> "If one hears sūtras such as these, believes, understands, accepts, upholds, reads, and recites them, and by employing the power of expedient means makes distinctions and expounds them for the sake of living beings, rendering their meaning perfectly clear, one is thereby guarding and protecting the dharma, and this is called dharma offering."

Even on the surface it is evident that something radical is being proposed here. The narrative of Prince Moon Parasol started off with his father instructing him to worship and provide useful physical items to the Medicine King Buddha. In that phase of the mini-history, the father at home replicated himself in his princely sons by instructing them in the worship of an external father figure who apparently lives on a larger time circuit than do kings and princes. But once this particularly inspired son wished for something better, his desire produced direct teachings from that external Buddha-father who explained to him, oddly it would seem, to engage in a kind of offering that leaves buddhas out of it altogether, even as switching to this mode of offering is *exactly* what produces buddhas. The Medicine King Buddha, in essence, has said, "Your offering to me is fulfilled by trafficking in these Mahāyāna sūtras—once that is performed all Buddhist tasks can be counted as accomplished, and the reproduction of buddhas and tradition will be assured." Of course, the reason for this shift away from engagement with a living buddha seems to have everything to do with the context of when this text and the other early Mahāyāna sūtras were written. That is, the narrative is trying to locate trafficking in Mahāyāna textuality at the font of buddha-production so as to locate itself as that which came before buddhas and that which makes them. Once lodged there, the text can then, of course, offer legitimacy to any recipient.

Recognizing this reconstruction of devotion so as to make textual devotion the reproductive act in manifesting tradition takes us very close to my basic argument about these early Mahāyāna texts, since narratives are producing buddhas and other authority figures who baldly assert that the texts they inhabit sum up tradition and are to be treated as buddhalike Things. Furthermore, this kind of reading-for-tradition and reading-for-buddha-presence seems to match, in tenor, Vimalakīrti's comments in the preceding chapters where he urged that bodhisattvas should see each other as buddhas, implying again that on some level the buddhas are getting cut out of

79. T.556b.19 ff. See Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 139, for a slightly different translation.
80. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 140; T.14.556c.3.

the picture as the rhetoric moves to resituate power, prestige, and authority in the matrix of the text that supports these "paper buddhas."

The anxiety over Buddhist practice in the absence of the Buddha is clear in Prince Moon Parasol's response to this teaching from Medicine King Buddha. Prince Moon Parasol, having subsequently left the family life, offers this buddha his belongings and promises to continue his heritage after his death, saying, "World Honored One, after the Tathāgata has passed into extinction, I will carry out offerings of the Law and guard the correct Law." The Medicine King Buddha in turn confers on him the prophecy of becoming his successor: "In the Latter Age *(moshi),* you will guard and protect the citadel of the Law *(facheng).*"[81]

This event marks the intertwining of lineages as the Medicine King Buddha confers on Prince Moon Parasol the rights to his teaching. The following lines do not explicitly grant Prince Moon Parasol full buddha-identity, but they do say that this was a prophecy that led Prince Moon Parasol to leave home and "continue to turn the wheel of the Law turned by the Medicine King Buddha"[82] and to perform in a buddhalike way by enlightening countless persons. Thus, based on receiving the teaching about "the dharma offering," the patrimony of the Medicine King Buddha now flows into Prince Moon Parasol who took up the Law and then performed as a buddha would. Thus just as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* a primal buddha-lineage is cracked open so that buddha-identity can flow through the conduits of proper reading and the reproduction of the texts that explain just this cracking open of the buddha-lineages.

The effect of including the Prince Moon Parasol in the Medicine King Buddha's lineage comes, though, with an odd side effect. We learn that Moon Parasol's father, Jeweled Parasol, has become a buddha named Jeweled Flame and that his other 999 sons have become buddhas too. In fact, we learn that these thousand sons who turned into buddhas are none other than the thousand buddhas of our age. No cause is given for this grand inclusion in the buddha-lineage, and obviously there is a bit of illogic to this claim as the father had not performed "the dharma offering" and had disappeared from the narrative before any of this took place. Thus his buddhahood was really constructed post facto in light of his son's adoption of this new form of "the dharma offering," suggesting thereby that the two lineages are now "physically" joined such that the buddha-essence could even flow backward in time to buddhify the dead father of the at-home lineage.

Looked at more closely, the entire at-home patriarchal lineage has in effect been refathered as the single son, Prince Moon Parasol, receives the

81. These two lines are found in Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 141; T.14.556c.17 ff.

82. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 141; T.14.556c.24.

Medicine King Buddha's teaching, and this refathering produces a buddha-lineage on top of a lay lineage wherein his father and all his brothers are now turned into buddhas. This detail might seem irrelevant, but I believe it is setting a template for the deepest task of the entire text—producing in the reader the sense that in receiving the text, he has been included in the lineage of buddhas, just as Prince Moon Parasol has been. And, again matching the *Lotus Sūtra,* this jump "downward" to put the buddha-lineage in the hands of nonbuddhas is softened by having it land on a prior patriarchy, in particular, a patriarchy that had already proven its allegiance to this higher form of patriarchy. This, no doubt, lends a more legitimate cover to what would otherwise seem like the casual dispersal of the most treasured item in the universe. In the *Vimalakīrti,* it is Jeweled Parasol's thousand sons who receive the buddha-essence based on nothing more than their sonship to Jeweled Parasol and their faithful acceptance of his command to worship the Medicine King Buddha. Of course, in the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra,* it was Sun Moon Bright's eight sons who became buddhas based on similar devotion to their at-home father.

Bringing this distant patriline and its modes of reproduction even closer to the reader of our age, Śākyamuni explains that Prince Moon Parasol was none other than himself. By recounting his history and lineage affiliation in such a manner, the narrative is poised to turn outward and offer the reader a facsimile of what Śākyamuni received in that distant era when he was Prince Moon Parasol. In arranging for this gift outward to the reader, the narrative has defined "dharma offering" as trafficking in Mahāyāna sūtras, and this has been explained as the cause for the forward reproduction of the buddha-lineage. What this amounts to is a new law about the Law (a new dharma about the Dharma) in which content and form are fused. As Prince Moon Parasol accepted the definition of the "dharma offering," he was accepting the claim that *trafficking* in the Law not only fulfills the Law but reproduces Lawgivers as well.

Of course, on one level this makes sense since lawgivers, by definition, traffic in the law. Nevertheless, the proposed massive slide in Buddhist dogma is not to be missed: to be a purveyor of Mahāyāna texts is to find oneself primed to be a buddha. Thus insofar as one mimics Prince Moon Parasol and accepts this law about the Law, along with the account of how just such an acceptance is effective in turning nonbuddhas into buddhas, then the reader finds himself or herself occupying a position parallel to Prince Moon Parasol's, with the implication that he or she too will be lodged in the lineage of buddhas and be worthy of receiving the same kind of prediction that he received from the Medicine King Buddha. Hence as readers receive the answer to that question regarding the practice of "dharma offering," they learn that they can fulfill just that obligation to traffic in Mahāyāna sūtras.

Śākyamuni concludes his story by telling Indra that dharma offering will replace direct offering to the Buddha: "Thus, heavenly lord, you should understand this important point. The dharma offering is the finest of all offerings. It is first in rank and without equal. Therefore, heavenly lord, you should use this dharma offering as your offering to the Buddha."[83] Thus, as in the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra,* the narrative has effectively grafted itself onto the tried and true structures of Buddhist authority, even as it uses those structures to overcome Buddhist authority as it had been known. The Buddha has essentially been made to say, I was born of the will to traffic in Mahāyāna sūtras, and you Indra and the reader, will likewise be offering me the highest offering when you offer me nothing but instead likewise traffic in Mahāyāna sūtras. The Buddha's patriarchy has been now resculpted so that its essence is defined not by a gift of truth from the preceding truth-father but by a universal law that states: trafficking in Mahāyāna sūtras produces buddhas and the Law.

STAGE SIX: DON'T LOSE THIS BOOK—MAITREYA REINSTALLED AS PUBLISHING IMPRESARIO

The final chapter of the *Vimalakīrti* flows directly from the story that the Buddha has told regarding the role of devotion to Mahāyāna textuality in his own lineage. Here, the Buddha formally recognizes Maitreya as his descendant in a manner that Buddhist readers would, at first, accept as fairly normal. This is because though later in the chapter discussion of the transmission will include mention of its textual reality in the form of this very text, the first half of the formal investiture relies solely on a vague item called "this Law of Highest Enlightenment."[84] The Buddha, leaving the identity of this Law decidedly vague, says:[85]

> "Maitreya, I now take this Law of Unsurpassed Enlightenment, gathered over countless millions of uncountable eons, and entrust it to you. In the Latter Age *(moshi),* after the Buddha has passed into extinction, you must employ your supernatural powers to propagate sūtras such as this, spreading them throughout the continent of Jambudvīpa and never allowing them to be wiped out."

Though at first this seems normal enough, on reflection it is clear that in light of defining "dharma offering" as that which holds buddhas together, we have in this brief passage the introduction of two more formulations of

83. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 142; T.15.557a.4.

84. This language is also used in chapter 23 (on the Medicine King Buddha) of the *Lotus Sūtra;* see Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra,* pp. 283–84.

85. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 143, with modifications; T.14.557a.7.

the Law that hold the buddha-lineage together, especially in the Latter Age. In the first line, the law is the Law of Unsurpassed Enlightenment, which seems vague and nonspecific. This vagueness only increases when the second line explains that at this moment the Buddha is also transmitting to Maitreya the will to propagate "sūtras such as this" *(rushi beijing)*[86] in the time after the death of the buddha, never allowing them to be cut off. Clearly, the implication, especially given the definition of the "dharma offering" in the preceding chapter, is that regardless of the nature of the Law of Unsurpassed Enlightenment that Maitreya is receiving, his own work will be to transmit the Law in the form of sūtras, like this one, that will be relied on to extend and preserve the buddha legacy.

We could speculate that the vagueness in defining the item of transmission to Maitreya is designed to keep physical texts out of the hands of buddhas who, at least in this strata of Mahāyāna texts, do not read or traffic in literary forms of sūtras. Maitreya can be in charge of dispensing the text, through his supernatural powers, but there seems to have been some hesitancy to register the text as fully objectified in just this exchange between buddhas.

Reluctance to have buddhas handle texts may be part of the concerns shaping this transmission moment, but I think there is a more pressing dynamic in view. Reading this chapter in the context of the previous chapter, it seems that the author chose not to name his text as the item transmitted at this important juncture because it is still in the midst of a carefully wrought sequence in which the text's presentation of orality is gradually being turned into literature that can be handled by figures in and outside the narrative. Thus, the transmission motifs in these two final chapters make it clear that the author, in giving the history of the Buddha's past, has also been giving the history of the birth of this text, a history that moves from being oral to being substantialized into a text that Maitreya will magically cause to be put into the hands of those who seek the Mahāyāna in the future.

This alchemy of turning orality into literature is further complicated by the way the author is also linking this emerging textual form to the creation of buddha-identity. At the first stage something called "dharma offering" emerged from the fusion of two lineages, the buddha-lineage of Medicine King Buddha and the at-home lineage of Jeweled Parasol. At that point, transmission was explained as the effect of engaging in the "dharma offering," which boiled down to nothing more than the devotion to receive and reproduce Mahāyāna texts. Though the *Vimalakīrti* text had yet to formally name itself as the item transacted in history, it had nonetheless prepared a

86. T.14.557a.10.

place for itself since the "dharma offering" between buddhas was defined by the Buddha of our era as the willingness to transact the Law in the form of Mahāyāna sūtras. Thus, though the form of the law transacted back between the Medicine King Buddha and Prince Moon Parasol (also known as Śākyamuni Buddha) contained Mahāyāna textuality within it, the narrative had not allowed for the obvious presence of textuality to appear. Taking this next step of narrating its own, fully textual presence in the very juncture of transmission is what the following segments of the chapter will seek to accomplish.

To gain some perspective on this convoluted format, let me point out that the text is presenting the by now familiar tension of being both itself and outside itself, so as to be able to speak of its role in history, both in the past and in the future. In constructing this double, the *Vimalakīrti* text is simply claiming two things: the ultimate Buddhist Law is within its perimeters, yet also within those perimeters is the statement that transacting this version of the Law fulfills the Law, and this is said by the figure known to the reader as the ultimate Lawgiver—Śākyamuni. Put another way, as the narrative moves through these two chapters it is accomplishing the difficult task of explaining its own birth and identity as the ultimate signifier in the sequence of Buddhist legitimacy. Thus, according to the history Śākyamuni gave, the text was not born on this particular day in Vaiśālī. Rather, it had been prepared eons in advance as the buddhas began trafficking in the command to traffic in Mahāyāna textuality, and now as Śākyamuni transmits the text to Maitreya he is fulfilling the Law as it had been given to him so many eons before by the Medicine King Buddha.

This bending over backward to locate the text as both the effect of lineage transmission and the cause of its future propagation resides, of course, exactly at the heart of all patriarchal discourses on truth: truth needs a father who gives it, along with the Law that asserts that there is no other Law, and yet that truth-giving father needs a truth-father too, and hence the bad infinity of trying to find patriarchal truth apart from the patriarchy of truth and the laws that it promulgates in order to promulgate the law of owning truth. To ease the inevitable self-reflexivity structuring the situation, the author of the *Vimalakīrti,* much as the author of the introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra* relied on the *Sūtra of Limitless Meaning,* has created a mediating textlike thing that he labels "this Law of Unsurpassed Enlightenment."

Though this title and its referent remain ill defined, and of virtually no interest to the narrative, the above quote makes clear that it contains all of tradition—"gathered over countless millions of uncountable eons"—and the essence of the lineage that has to be passed on to Maitreya if he is to be the next buddha. Thus when we return to read this statement of transmission it looks just like it should, given the structural exigencies of paternal truth-claims: it is the transmission of the content of truth, referred to by

name but left undefined, accompanied by the law of its transmission, which legislates the duplication of truth in deserving descendants and provides proof of its own "historical" legitimacy. That is to say, the reader should not be left wondering how the "dharma offering" turned out to be the essence of the law and the lineage. Instead, the reader should simply take up the text and assent to these self-reflexive commandments: (1) take "me," that is, the text, to be tradition, and (2) accept my statement that in that act of taking me (including my claims about myself) to be tradition, you will have fulfilled tradition.

Maitreya's response to this gift from Śākyamuni and its accompanying discourse is telling. He says to the Buddha:[87]

> "World Honored One, this is something I have never heard before. It is as the Buddha has said. I must remove myself far off from evils such as these[88] and strive to uphold this Law of Enlightenment that the Buddha has gathered over numberless uncountable eons. If in the ages to come there are good men and good women who seek the Mahāyāna, I will see to it that sūtras such as this come into their hands, will lend them powers of memorization, and will cause them to accept, uphold, read, and recite the sūtras and expound them far and wide for others."

This passage is very curious and reveals the deft hand of a careful author. Most interesting is the way that it makes Maitreya bounce between two zones of reception. In his initial statement, he receives the discourse as something oral—"this is something I have never *heard* before." But then in the following statements, he treats the discourse as something already in literary sūtra form, something that one could and should read and pass around to others. In fact, he promises that future seekers of the Mahāyāna will have his magical assistance such that "sūtras such as this come into their hands" *(shoude rushi deng jing)*. Thus Maitreya, at this first moment of full transmission of legitimacy with the text as the tool of paternity, is lodged in that very uncomfortable place of being in two zones at once and knowing of the text in both oral and written forms. Moreover, though he is inside the text, and thus in the same narrative space as the action the narrative has evoked, he is also outside of the text talking about what he will do in the future with it.

This unstable orality in a text—having actors speak about the text as both oral and textual—takes us to the heart of the Mahāyāna writing project. The text as text first had to create history and orality performed "live" by supposedly real historical figures in order to win legitimacy for itself; yet at the end of the day it has to make that orality endorse the text that holds it.

87. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 144–45; T.14.557b.4.

88. It is hard to know what this phrase means, but it might refer back to Maitreya's earlier failures to understand Vimalakīrti in the third chapter.

Just this return from fabricated orality into textuality is what we are witnessing as Maitreya receives the text in both an oral and a literary format.

Should there be any doubt about the purposeful confusion of these two formats, in the speech that the Buddha gives to Maitreya as he confers on him "this Law of Highest Enlightenment" he explains two types of bodhisattvas who have distinctly different attitudes toward the written word. The Buddha says:[89]

> "Maitreya, you should understand that there are two types of bodhisattvas. What are these two types? The first type loves varied phrases and literary embellishments *(hao zaju wenshi).* The second is not afraid of deeper principles and is able to enter into the true meaning. If there are those who love varied phrases and literary embellishments, you may be sure that they are beginners in the bodhisattva Way. But if there are those who, approaching these extremely profound sūtras, with their teachings on nondefilement and nonattachment, are not timid or fearful but can enter into the meaning and, having heard the sūtras, with pure minds, will accept, uphold, read, and recite them and practice them as the Law directs, you may be sure that they have been practicing the way for a long time."

Undeniably, this passage shows that the author has prepared a speech for his narrative-buddha that directly addresses how the reader ought to read this work. Thus just as Maitreya's reception speech was poised in two zones, so, too, is this advice. It is ostensibly given to Maitreya, but clearly it is directed to the reader who is warned that if he reads the text for its literary qualities, then he is missing the deeper meaning and will have consequently won for himself the disgrace of being but a beginning bodhisattva.

The Buddha continues in this vein of distinguishing good and bad reception of the text as text when he again defines what he takes to be second-rate bodhisattvas. One version of these beginner types simply lack courage because when they "*hear* some profound sūtra they have not heard before, are alarmed and timorous and, giving way to doubt, cannot bring themselves to comply with it."[90] The other type, though they "guard, uphold, understand, and expound profound sūtras of this type, *are unwilling to closely approach them (bu ken qinjin) to offer them alms or treat them with respect (gongyang gongjing),* and at times even speak of their faults before others."[91] These passages, too, bounce between the oral and literary form. These second-rate bodhisattvas are described reacting to sūtras vaguely defined as "of this type," but then in the description of the second type of unwanted bodhi-

89. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* pp. 143–44; T.14.557a.16.
90. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 144; T.14.155a.23.
91. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 144 (emphasis added), with minor changes; T.14.557a.25.

sattva it is clear that the author is having the Buddha indict them for failing to engage in a full-fledged form of sūtra-worship, including approaching them in a ritualistic manner to give them alms and respect. Apparently, the author is still trying to take advantage of the orality of his textually fabricated buddha in order to define the reader's response to the text, a response that is defined in terms of depth of reading, submission to its demands, and a level of worship that one would normally render to a respected teacher. Naturally, all this only makes sense when the narrative was written imagining itself in the future as a worthy physical object of worship that one can approach and treat to the basic modes of obeisance that were traditionally reserved for teachers and relics.

In addition to these complicated attempts to move between oral and literary media in order to bully the reader into accepting the text as the definitive form of tradition, there is of course that other level that we are quite familiar with by now: this transmission moment *newly* inducts Maitreya into the buddha-lineage through receiving this discourse on the truth about tradition. He admits that he has not heard what the Buddha has said before, with this comment presumably referring to everything that has preceded this moment in the text. Obviously, this response puts him in the same position as all the other traditional figures in the text, such as Śāriputra, who reacted in similar ways. This claim to newness, then, implies that before these events took place in the narrative, tradition, as supposedly present in the traditional Śākyamuni to Maitreya transmission, was not established. But now with the discourse preformed and encapsulated and handed over to Maitreya, Maitreya is for the first time rightfully installed as the Buddha's successor. Obviously, this trope matches rather closely the reformulation of Maitreya's identity that the *Lotus Sūtra* produced in its opening chapter.

Most important, and again like the *Lotus Sūtra,* is that in the process of relegitimizing Maitreya a new tool has been produced, the text itself, which Maitreya explains will hereafter be available to everyone—all those "good men and good women who seek the Mahāyāna."[92] When this transmission to Maitreya is fully played out, the author has Śākyamuni give the text as text to Ānanda *(shouchi shi jing),* thereby replaying tradition's assumption that Ānanda is the keeper of the Buddha's word, even though this identity had been thoroughly revoked in the eleventh chapter. And then, with the work of transmitting Tradition now accomplished in the narrative, the text closes out with Mañjuśrī, Vimalakīrti, Śāriputra, and Ānanda rejoicing at "hearing the preaching of the Buddha."[93]

92. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 145; 14.557a.13.
93. Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,* p. 146; T.14.557b.22.

A DEATH THAT WAS LATER MADE INTO A KILLING

To close out this reading of the *Vimalakīrti,* let me address what this reading implies about the historical forces at work shaping the text: What might have inspired someone to write a narrative devoted to showing how tradition did not have Tradition and then making that very narrative *as text* into the item that would hold Tradition together and move it forward in time? Evaluating the *Vimalakīrti*'s reworking of authority from this historical point of view requires two things that I advanced in my reading of the *Diamond Sūtra:* first, locating its authorship roughly five hundred years after the death of the Buddha—something little disputed in modern Buddhist studies and arguably apparent in the text's interest in what to do in the absence of the Buddha in the time of the Latter Age *(moshi),* a time that traditionally was understood to mean in the second five-hundred-year period after the death of the Buddha; and second, assuming that in this era of the Latter Age the author of the *Vimalakīrti* and his anticipated reader were substantially worried about their connections back to the Buddha.[94] Evidence for this kind of generic anxiety over distance from legitimate Buddhist authority appears in the text itself, as well as in other contemporary works from this period. If we make these two rather likely assumptions, then I suggest that there are two principal themes that we should focus on in interpreting the dialectical overcoming of tradition that the *Vimalakīrti* orchestrates.

First, though I have spoken above in the language of "violence" and the text's effort to kill off old-style tradition, in fact, at the time of the text, tradition might have seemed already moribund to some observers, and not due to the machinations of Vimalakīrti-like pranksters. Hence what looks like the uprooting of tradition *in* the text probably is designed, in part, to make the apparent decline of tradition look comprehensible and even predetermined. Thus a first-century reader would look up from reading the *Vimalakīrti* to regard with new eyes an uninspired Buddhist clergy and conclude, "Aha, so that's why. The prosaic form of the Buddhist tradition was never really even tradition to begin with, having never been properly inducted into the Buddhist Tradition in the *Vimalakīrti*'s unique sense of Tradition." Consequently, the narrative serves, on one level, as an etiology: if tradition looks moribund in the forms it took in the centuries after the death of the Buddha, it is just because it was not authentic from the outset, and now you, the reader, know why.

Second, as I have argued above, detaching old-style tradition from the

94. Jan Nattier's fine book, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), provides many examples of texts that are probably from this era that predict, or rather, report, the uninspired state of the Buddhist institution. See especially, chapter 3, "Timetables of Decline."

Buddha and from any claim to legitimacy comes, part and parcel, with the tool for the reader to reattach himself or herself to the Buddha and Buddhist legitimacy. In fact, the legitimate destruction and reconstruction of tradition are two sides of the same coin: the narrative, to undermine old-style legitimacy, had to create within its borders the image of legitimacy that would appear to have the right to give and take legitimacy. Of course, part of this legitimacy came in the figure of Vimalakīrti, but he was only given license to "kill" tradition by the traditional progenitor of tradition—Śākyamuni—and he was dispensed with once his tasks were accomplished. Thus, on several levels, negative rhetoric and legitimacy came hand-in-hand. The trick, and it required a deft touch, was to then fold that narrative recounting open season on traditional icons into the space of the text and define the rules for textual transmission to take over the role of reproducing tradition.

Reducing tradition to textual presence obviously works to create an alternative track for keeping legitimacy in time, but we shouldn't miss what an important role negative rhetoric played in that redeployment of tradition. With the apparently irrefutable powers of Vimalakīrti's antinomian rhetoric, the reader is tempted into thinking that one can always prove to oneself that the more prosaic representatives of tradition lack the very thing that makes Tradition. Consequently, not only does the text compress time in terms of returning to the Buddha and his paradigmatic dharma offering, but it also frames negation as the most crucial item for overcoming and reconstituting tradition. Thus as the reader reads over Vimalakīrti's shoulder and sees how he eats these little tradition fellows for breakfast, he learns that this act of executing normal sites of tradition is, functionally, the founding gesture of the text and the gateway to reinscribing tradition in another format. Consequently, the killing of old-style tradition in order to reestablish tradition elsewhere needs to be kept in view as the most important literary trope offered by these Mahāyāna sūtras.

TAKING THE LAW INTO YOUR OWN HANDS

Having insisted on reading the *Vimalakīrti* as a written text fully aware of itself as a literary document, there are a host of questions to pose, questions that easily could require another book. For instance, if we assume with the Russian Formalist Boris Tomachevski that all literary works need a theme, what should we posit as the unifying theme of this work? Without pushing too hard on the evidence adduced above, the theme seems to be none other than the relationship between the reader and the text. Concern for just this relationship is in the end, quite literally, the only thing that matters. The text needs the reader to install pure authority *in* the text, and this is done with the figure of the Buddha in the first chapter and the "history" of

Vimalakīrti's teaching that comprises chapters 2 through 12; then, the text requires that the reader extract pure authority *from* the text, which is arranged for in the three concluding chapters. Arguably, everything else in the text is present as an accompaniment to these two basic gestures. Thus the text is about itself in a fundamental manner that goes much deeper than the claim, for instance, that the novel is about the novel. Here, just as with the sentence, "This sentence is written with 14k gold chalk," the content of the sūtra is both implicitly and explicitly about the form of the statement—its residence in the vehicle of the text that will come to hold the essence of tradition and facilitate new forms of authority and legitimacy.

An equally provocative line of inquiry could be opened up around the question of Vimalakīrti as hero. One might immediately think that he fits the hero role quite ably, since, after all, he combats the Buddhist institution and wins his day in the sun. A closer look at the narrative, though, would suggest that many things about Vimalakīrti are unlike the standard hero model. First, he undergoes no change, development, or advancement. And, save for his visit to the Buddha in the Āmra gardens, he does not travel or move through various zones that would increase his powers or resolve internal contradictions. Second, he is never at risk. Risk in the text is borne solely by old-school Buddhists such as Śāriputra and Maitreya. Vimalakīrti is never threatened by anyone's authority or rhetoric and appears as a figure completely consummated before the action begins. Apparently, he has nothing to gain from anyone, and clearly the text is of no value to him. Third, the reader is not directly invited to experience his interior. We hear only one sentence of internal dialogue suggestive of emotion (when he's tricking the Buddha about his sickness), whereas Śāriputra's or Mahākāśyapa's thoughts and feelings are much more in evidence.

Similarly, and perhaps most damning for a theory of Vimalakīrti as hero, Vimalakīrti is not part of the solution that the text finds for itself. He is present as the problem—the Real perspective on tradition that cannot be digested by tradition—and yet in resolving this conflict, he is first folded into tradition in the form of the text that is to be transmitted between Śākyamuni and Maitreya, and then folded into the reader who is holding it in his or her hands. Throughout these final chapters Vimalakīrti is absent and inactive since his function as the "heart of darkness" bludgeon to be used on old-style tradition is no longer needed.

If we do not take Vimalakīrti to be the hero of the drama, then we have two options. We could simply conclude that this text does not require a hero. Perhaps this narrative reconstructing the Law and offering it to the reader produces desire, fantasy, and devotion without needing a hero and the very normal structures of identification with such a hero. This could be argued, but I think another option is more tenable. The identity that is onstage at the beginning, middle, and end is that of the traditional Buddhist. And this is the identity, presumably, that the author is expecting the reader to bring to his

text. Though we should allow for the possibility that Mahāyāna sūtra authors wrote against each other's narratives, the *Vimalakīrti* does not seem designed to work on an already convinced and converted Mahāyāna audience. The opposite seems to be the case, and thus I believe it best to read the hero as the reader. His or her identity is well prepared for by the narrative, and represents the place of fullest closure, and this closure comes in the wake of experiencing threats, risks, and identity shifts.

Thus, in line with my readings of the prior three texts, I think we have to situate the reader as identifying not with Vimalakīrti, or at least not directly, and much more with Śāriputra and the other familiar figures of tradition. Hence the reader is hammered on by Vimalakīrti as he reads over the shoulder of Śāriputra and the others, experiencing their humiliations and likely also thinking of no retorts in the face of Vimalakīrti's bewildering challenges. Thus the reader, piggybacked on Śāriputra, moves through a variety of spaces and legal arrangements that work to redefine his or her world and identity. And though this basic sequence of destruction and reconstruction matches other Mahāyāna works, in the *Vimalakīrti,* Śāriputra never really converts or manifests a full-blown Mahāyāna identity. True, at the end of the twelfth chapter, he is made to endorse the teaching, and to speak of how those in the future can receive the same benefits that he has, through their reception of the text. This endorsement, however, does not compare to his conversion in the *Lotus Sūtra,* where the reader was taken inside his person to experience both his anguish and his exaltation in receiving the supposedly final version of the Law, in the form of the *Lotus Sūtra.*

In the *Vimalakīrti,* the reader realizes, as he or she reaches the end of the narrative, that he or she has, in the very act of reading, received the final version of the Law. Moreover, along with the Law comes the narrative of how that version of the Law had already "killed" old-style tradition and how, by handling the text, the reader had already been performing a good part of the act of text reception so glorified by the Buddha's explanation of how "dharma offering" had been the impetus to buddha-reproduction and the continuation of Tradition. Thus the text has, in an altogether clever way, designed a narrative for the reader in which finishing the text roughly equals gaining a transmission of total Tradition equal to that finally conferred on Maitreya. Reading, as formulated by the author, has already been made into the conduit that conveys authenticity, and precisely because the author has created figures like Śākyamuni who explain that reading and trafficking in textuality are the very practices that made *them* legitimate.

BEING UNBEARABLE

If we agree to locate the place of reader-identification in the figures of old-school Buddhists, we also need to include the possibility that though the text is dialectically organized for the reader to read from the Hīnayāna posi-

tion into a Mahāyāna identity, it is also likely that the reader is tempted to enjoy Vimalakīrti's position, at least partially. This might not be an outright identification of the nature of "I am not that different from one such as he" but rather a subtler identification along the lines of: "Though I'm not a full-fledged bodhisattva of that caliber, still I can see that Vimalakīrti is right in smashing old-style tradition in this manner, and in fact, I can on occasion win debates of this nature too."

Thus, just as in the *Diamond Sūtra,* there are good reasons for thinking that the *Vimalakīrti* also invites the reader to read over the shoulder of Father2, that speaker of the new Law that ended the reign of the old Law (Father1). Moreover, in reading the middle sections where Vimalakīrti overcomes his various opponents, it is clear that the rhetoric has expanded not simply to drive home the impossibility of old-style perspectives but also to bathe the reader in two emotions—pleasure and dread. Again like the *Diamond Sūtra,* as the reader receives these passages that pound on the unthinkability of any straightforward presentation of old-style Buddhist practice, he or she is both under assault and seduced with endless flourishes of rhetoric that reveal a higher mastery of the Law, a mastery that ends the Law as it was known and yet still seems to speak with compelling legal authority.

The deep impossibility of responding to his challenges widens the gulf between the reader and Vimalakīrti, and though this seems to be counted on to generate the desire to keep reading, to trade in old-style Buddhism, and to take the text to be tradition, I am not at all sure that this counts as identification per se. Rather there is a sustained aura of awe and attraction generated around his character that is basically summed up in the question, How could this man be so profound, so beyond normal categories, yet so eloquent? That is, how can he both break the rules of tradition, the rules of "normal" logic, and still perform linguistically with such rigor and efficacy? Thus, in the figure of Vimalakīrti, the author has sculpted a version of his textual product, since both Vimalakīrti and the text traffic in the unthinkable and the impossible, and yet this in no way impedes their ability to communicate and effect desired shifts in their audiences—internal and external. Arguably, for both the figure of Vimalakīrti and the text that holds him, it is just that ability to make unthinkability present in the world of language and narrative, and to apply it to making new symbolic orders and communities, that makes the entire project of constructing Vimalakīrti and the text worth achieving.

Hence I conclude that the figure of Vimalakīrti is designed to represent a "living" version of the higher Law that is tantalizing for its excesses, its impossibility, and its power of exclusion, even as all these extremes are precisely what any new symbolic order needs as it overcomes another order and seeks to generate new structures of desire, discipline, and closure. Similarly,

I conclude that these extreme and impossible attributes that adhere to Vimalakīrti, along with the lack of an interior to his persona, render him a fearsome embodiment of the Law that appears as nothing but the Law, and in just such a way that effectively renders all others guilty, at risk, and in need of access to the very authenticity that the narrative promises to deliver.

Yet there is another problem to confront in a text so clearly dedicated to the reconstruction and transmission of authority. Vimalakīrti is excluded from transmission. Despite the brief mention in the second chapter of how he served innumerable buddhas in the past, he neither directly receives transmission nor works at passing it on. I believe this is because he is only the first half of the mechanism of transmission—the temporary form of killing-legality that extracts identity from one matrix with the expectation of its imminent recollection in another matrix. More exactly, he is the means of mediating the shift from one patriarchal form of truth to another. Once seen in this light, Vimalakīrti appears as pure negation lodged in the figure of a man. Of course, he needed authority to perform this execution, but his authority remains negative and he is never shown endorsing "dharma offering" or explaining the refunneling of authority in a patriarchal conduit. And, similarly, the text never asks the reader or the other members of the narrative to worship him. He leaves, in effect, no personal remainder and is completely a slave to the text's agenda of metastasizing truth's conduit. As we have seen, his work is accomplished when the old Law is destroyed and the audience and reader have been suitably convinced and enthralled by the possibility of a new form of the Law that exists on that unthinkable side of Being that Vimalakīrti was pitching from.

Making sense of the role of unthinkability in the text takes us back to my introductory comments about how Watson misinterpreted the text by ignoring its structure and its organizing agendas. As I hope I have shown, the point is not whether or not Vimalakīrti's position in the middle chapters remains unthinkable and therefore beyond the pale of tradition, order, and the Law. This could be debated, and it might be shown that, *logically,* in the wake of Vimalakīrti's comments, tradition, transmission, and the Law are fundamentally impossible. Instead, the point is that for the author, the unthinkability in Vimalakīrti's "speech" is completely consonant with the text's larger agendas. Thus, in terms of narrative, Vimalakīrti and his speeches exist *for* the text and not the other way around, as almost all modern commentators have assumed.

Reading in this manner simply means forever banishing the hope that the text represents some real events—Vimalakīrti actually inhabiting Vaiśālī and carrying on in this fashion. It also means recognizing that an author has organized the text as a reading experience that manipulates the reader in traceable ways that move through Vimalakīrti's calculated "grindings" and concludes by making reading the solution to tradition. If the narrative suc-

cessfully works on the reader, the reader will want more than anything to continue the work of conveying Mahāyāna sūtras that are to be read, explained, copied, and so on. Thus, like negation in the *Diamond Sūtra,* Vimalakīrti as a figure is but the most seductive manner to move from text to text, and this movement was clearly arranged for by the author of the text just as he arranged negation to be the surest way to move from one version of patriarchy to another. In brief, the figure of Vimalakīrti fully represents the extraction of the negative principle *in* patriarchy to thereby apply that principle of negation *on* patriarchy in order to overcome it on one level and re-create it on another.

The advantages to reading in this manner are threefold. First, the text's structures and elements are well covered. Second, by reading the text as literature, we see how much the *Vimalakīrti* shares with other early Mahāyāna sūtras. This intertextalia opens the door to speculation on the nature of this early Buddhist literary culture, a topic I briefly address below and in the last chapter. Third, when the exuberant language of unthinkability in the *Vimalakīrti* was appropriated by Chan writers, with and without attribution, it was employed for agendas other than the advancement of the cult of the text. In fact, with the *Vimalakīrti* arguably the Mahāyāna sūtra of choice for many early Chan writers, it appears that this language of negation was recognized for its ability to overcome tradition and reinstall it elsewhere. The difference was that this time Chan writers took the Law out of Mahāyāna sūtras, and the reading experience, and lodged it in the bodies of Chinese men who were essentially buddhified and set at the center of a revamped monastic system, endowed with an entirely new form of Buddhist literature to hold truth-in-time within attractive patriarchal forms.

TRADITION AND THE ILLUSION OF SAMENESS

To draw out some of the implications of the above reading, and to place this argument in the context of recent scholarship in Buddhist studies, I want to close by reviewing Robert Thurman's rather opposite assessment of the text. This quick review of Thurman's position, which dates from his 1975 translation of the *Vimalakīrti* from Tibetan, and thus may not be his current position, will nonetheless highlight what is gained from choosing to read the text as a literary work.

Like Watson, Thurman imagines that it is possible to treat Vimalakīrti as a figure separate from the textual matrix that he inhabits. Thus Thurman writes, "My main goal in this translation is to recover the authentic *teaching* of Vimalakīrti and so my focus is philosophical rather than philological."[95] In

95. *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. x. "Teachings" is in italics in the original.

setting up his agenda in this manner, Thurman offers the illusion of getting behind the text to get at the man and his teachings. Interpreting Thurman's opening lines as offering the promise of leaving the script to find the real-life "actors" is borne out by the rest of the introduction in which Thurman speaks of Vimalakīrti on and off as a real person and not a literary creation. Moreover, by page 6 he has moved into describing Vimalakīrti's techniques as parallel to historical teachers such as "the Middle Way masters," the "Great Sorcerers" *(mahāsiddhas),* and Chan and Zen masters.

Extracting Vimalakīrti from the text, and then joining him to these historical figures, allows Thurman to argue that Vimalakīrti's message is about practice in some real sense that he takes to be the "essence of the Mahāyāna." Having distilled Vimalakīrti's message down to the overcoming of dichotomies, he writes of such teachers: "The singular quality of such teachers' use of dichotomies lies in the fact that they relate them to the actual practice of the hearers, forcing them to integrate them in their minds and actions."[96] Practice, as we have seen in the *Vimalakīrtii* and the other three texts discussed, is rather difficult to find or define. In most cases, practice boils down to dharma offering in the strict sense of becoming a reader, devotee, and promoter of Mahāyāna sūtras. Thurman's reconstruction of the essence of Mahāyāna practice suppresses the cult of the text that the texts apparently care so much about and gives us instead a kind of real-life Zen situation with real teachers "forcing" students to integrate dichotomies "in their minds and actions."[97]

In line with these rather unlikely claims, Thurman's introduction is dedicated to showing that the content of the *Vimalakīrti*'s teaching matches the Buddha's teaching, which we are told is not different from Nāgārjuna's teaching, and which isn't that different from later tantric and Tibetan formulations. Blurring all notion of era, Thurman writes, "The Buddha gave this type of deepest teaching only to disciples able to deal with it. Nāgārjuna himself rarely spelled it out explicitly, restricting himself to providing the means whereby the disciplined intellect can strip away its own conceptualizations and habitual notions. But Vimalakīrti felt that such a message should be available to a much larger circle of people, for he expressed himself definitively on all occasions, as recorded in this Scripture."[98] In short, by

96. Thurman, *Holy Teaching,* p. 6.

97. The better argument would be to flip this over to say that the image of later teachers of Mahāyāna seems to have been sculpted based, in part, on the literary models of figures such as Vimalakīrti. Of course, whether these teachers actually were successful in performing, in life, the image of such perfection demonstrated in literature will be unknowable as they, historical though they were, are brought to us through the mediating form of Buddhist hagiography. Thus Thurman seems reluctant to consider the dialectical process that moves from text to action back to text, that is, from reading-fantasy to historical reenactment and then hagiography.

98. Thurman, *Holy Teaching,* p. 5.

overlooking the very real historicity of the text and its concerns with how to be Buddhist five hundred–plus years after the death of the Buddha, Thurman wants to inscribe the supposed content of the text—the message that Vimalakīrti "felt" should be made available—in a seamless tradition that runs unbroken from the Buddha to the various Mahāyāna writers.

To imagine this deep continuity in tradition, Thurman has to ignore the obvious cult of the text in the *Vimalakīrti,* as well as its equally obvious attempt to unseat and overcome earlier versions of truth and tradition. Noting either theme would reveal that the text is very much at odds with prior forms of tradition and, ironically, seems to veer away from Buddhist practices as they would have been known. Similarly, it is only by setting Vimalakīrti's teaching apart from the text that he can so smoothly compare the *Vimalakīrti* with Nāgārjuna's writing, which, by and large, lacks narratives, characters, and plot development, and likewise the promotion of the cult of the text.

When Thurman turns to imagine later Mahāyāna formulations, be they in India or in Tibet, his assumptions of sameness and continuity persist as he asserts that Vimalakīrti's method of resolving dichotomies "is one of many blatant hints of Tantric ideas in the background of his [Vimalakīrti's] teaching method."[99] By the end of the next paragraph Thurman wrongly asserts that the "culmination of the Sūtra is the vision of the Buddha Akṣobhya," in the twelfth chapter, and that this shows that the entire text is not too far from being a tantric work: "All these lend the Sūtra a certain aura of Tantra. Whatever the 'historical' relationship may be, it is safe to say that Vimalakīrti's method of the reconciliation of dichotomies, as based on the inconceivable liberation of the bodhisattva, forms a Tantra in its own right."[100] Obviously, Thurman is working hard to create essences and then use those essences to glide between historical eras and the various kinds of textual evidence that they produced.

Perhaps what is most disappointing in this insistence on sameness in tradition is that it prevents us from seeing that texts such as the *Vimalakīrti* or the *Lotus Sūtra* not only broke up tradition as it had been known but then themselves were broken up and reconsumed in order that a later, more established Mahāyāna tradition—which developed a solid institutional-monastic basis—could be reconstituted as the guardian and reservoir of truth and tradition. How this shift away from the restless and floating cult of the text that seems to have first existed on the periphery of traditional monastic Buddhism toward a steadier and enfranchised monastic Mahāyāna occurred has yet to be explained, but we should not avoid a chance to ask the question, which likely will reveal a very rich, active, and uneasy process of

99. Thurman, *Holy Teaching,* p. 7.
100. Thurman, *Holy Teaching,* p. 8.

Mahāyāna writers steadily reading and writing against each other in a manner that, while it suggests a very human situation, ruins the sheen of the stainless transmission of truth and authenticity running from the Buddha into these later forms of tradition that Thurman is dedicated to "recovering."

HONOR AMONG THIEVES: IRONIC AUTHORS AS CAREFUL READERS

Once we move away from readings of the text that insist on sameness and continuity in tradition, we can begin to explore the very interesting problem of textual borrowing that I mentioned at the outset of the chapter. Though this is an expansive topic in its own right, I want to leave this reading of the *Vimalakīrti* by questioning the writing process by which the Mahāyāna authors borrowed and reworked each other's material, as they clearly did. To begin thinking about what had to have been a budding literary world at the beginning of the common era, we need to ask several straightforward questions about lines of influence and borrowing. For instance, given that the *Vimalakīrti* seems aware of prior Buddhist literature—probably the *Lotus Sūtra,* the *Diamond Sūtra,* and other *Perfection of Wisdom* sūtras, not to mention a wide variety of pre-Mahāyāna works—might not a part of the radicalism in the *Vimalakīrti*'s rhetoric be due to coming second in the wave of writing?[101] That is, as a Johnny-come-lately, might not the content of the text be directly and indirectly the historical effect of coming at a certain point in the development of Mahāyāna rhetoric? Once we position a reading in this manner we can again turn to questions of genre, and development of genre, to wonder if the aggressive antinomianism present in this text is, in part, pushed by a snowball effect tending toward the radicalism that often accompanies a developing literary tradition.

Reading the *Vimalakīrti*'s radicalism in this manner certainly would be of value for reevaluating the importance of Vimalakīrti's lay status and the role of the goddess. Again relying on Tomachevski's arguments, we cannot overlook the possibility that having truth emerge from these extratraditional sites represents the standard trend of high literature mining "low" cultural sources to keep readers' interest.[102] Naturally, this trend to ever more dangerous and enticing plots fits well with the general "promiscuous" nature of these texts as they sought support and desire from any reader, regardless of identity or institutional affiliation. At any rate, considering these formal aspects of texts designed to circulate free of institutional strictures raises

101. For a discussion of pre- Mahāyānic and Mahāyānic textual precedents, see Étienne Lamotte, *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti* (Louvain: L'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, [1962] 1987), pp. 60–66.

102. See his "Thématique" in Tzvetan Todorov's *Théorie de la littérature* (1965; Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 267–312, esp. pp. 303 ff.

equally useful questions about genre pressures shaping content as sūtra authors developed each other's themes and competed with each other for what must have been a growing body of readers.

Last, and most interesting, it has become altogether too commonplace in religious studies and Buddhist studies to assume that religious writers are like modern scholars—anxious to get the facts right, with sources noted, as they present their work to a reading public. Clearly, many Mahāyāna writers saw it otherwise and felt entitled not only to twist things as they saw fit, but to carefully prepare for the seduction of the Other through the calculated production of images of authenticity and legality. The catch is that they seem to have learned how to write these seductive narratives, in part, from reading other authors' parallel attempts and *not* falling under the spells of the those narratives, for if they had, they would not have wanted to do anything but copy those narratives. In short, we could well imagine that the author of the *Vimalakīrti* read the *Lotus Sūtra* and developed a rather ironic attitude toward that work and the entire project of writing tradition in the form of the cult of the text.

Thus, whereas the author of the *Lotus Sūtra* took the Law into his own hands and manipulated it as he chose, the author of the *Vimalakīrti* seems to have read the *Lotus Sūtra,* and probably other Mahāyāna works, and took away from it not the desire to reproduce the *Lotus Sūtra* as instructed but the desire to reproduce the more basic act of rewriting the Buddhist tradition. Thus the author of the *Vimalakīrti* appears to have seen through prior attempts at seduction and, having seen just those attempts at seduction, borrowed key elements that would strengthen his own efforts at the same literary game of seducing readers into a new, more immediate version of the Law. Once looked at in this light, tradition was reconstructed by authors who shared in the unadmitted tradition of stealing from each other the very techniques for stealing the voice of tradition.

Of course, this perspective on how Mahāyāna authors read seduction narratives in order to figure out how to write better seduction narratives invites much more speculation, but for now I would conclude that at least some Buddhists seem to have been reading a good bit more carefully, and more cynically, than we moderns have been. And if this perspective is borne out, then we ought to revisit the standard eulogizing of expedient means in which authors explained how the Buddha told lies in order to tell the truth. Isn't this a doubly ironic admission of the way in which these authors proceeded, since they essentially wrote an image of themselves into tradition so that their own literary creations now matched the highest form of authentic discourse? That is, they rewrote the identity of the Buddha so that he appeared as one who, like themselves, wrote and rewrote tradition as he saw fit, and practiced the art of speaking lies for truth. In short, they figured out how to make the re-creation of tradition look deeply traditional.

Writing such an image of an honest *and* duplicitous Buddha allowed these writers an even more brilliant maneuver. By producing and displaying buddhas who "honestly" showed their listeners within the narrative their various tricks of seduction, these authors were able to turn this revelation of seduction into yet another form of seduction, even as the entire narrative thereby absolved itself of dishonesty and illegitimacy. In recognizing these sophisticated narrative techniques, we have to admit, too, that these texts reveal how Indian writers rather quickly mastered techniques for creating, in literature, images of authority and its twin brother, desire. Naturally, since we have more or less ignored these texts as texts, we have missed a chance to appreciate how much art and brilliance they often contain. Ironically, it is only when we read against the grain that we can begin to appreciate them as delicate works carefully balancing form against content in the courageous attempt to make "timeless" tradition flow through the new format of the text.

Conclusion

A Cavalier Attitude toward Truth-Fathers

He had remembered: "Copulation and mirrors are abominable." The text of the encyclopedia read: "For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply it and extend it." I said in all sincerity that I would like to see that article.

JORGE LUIS BORGES, *Ficciones*

The conclusions of this study flow in several directions. First, and most obviously, I have shown compelling evidence for reading each of these Mahāyāna texts *as* texts. Given the details in the preceding chapters, it is hard to imagine that readers would want to continue to treat their content apart from their overall narrative agendas. Plot, seduction, and text-reader contracts seem paramount in each case, and worth more attention than any particular event or discourse item. Also, the standard assumption that these written texts represent a preexisting oral form of the narrative—innocent of direct authorial construction—seems improbable. Though there still is the possibility that *parts* of these texts were extant as oral narratives, they clearly have been woven into literary enterprises that, among other things, objectify the narrative as a Thing and provide for its forward reproduction in time as textual object. Moreover, once we catch sight of the anxiety over legitimacy that seems to haunt these sūtras, shouldn't we assume that the very construction of the text's voice and its contracts with the reader called for a narrative that would explain those elements? That is, the very attempt to "voice" Buddhist truths in the narrative space of the written text was assumed vulnerable without the complex "proofs" of higher paternity, the predictable failure of the traditional disciples, and the seduction of the reader into a kind of text-equals-tradition devotion. Presumably, an oral tradition confident of its legitimacy in the eyes of the public would be little motivated to go to these lengths.[1]

1. Also, though these sūtras might appear to have been partly reworked by later editor-authors, that shouldn't keep us from assuming that there are still workable narrative frames holding the texts together. For instance, though the *Diamond Sūtra*'s second half is clearly an afterthought and something like a commentary on the first half, it does not significantly

Though many early Mahāyāna sūtras do not fit the model of the seductive literary gambit, still I think it is clear that rather important texts were written within the self-conscious sense that textuality, while offering great advantages, could only be relied on as a vehicle for truth and legitimacy when it was dressed up in rather complex configurations of faux orality that disavowed the very act of writing and took over traditional forms of Buddhist paternity in a manner that provided a kind of promiscuous paternity that could be enjoyed through the reading experience itself. Thus, to pick a humorous parallel, reading these sūtras without sensitivity to these basic problems of stolen legitimacy is like admiring a man in drag and comparing the attractiveness of his hairstyle and dress to *women* without appreciating the difficulty and audacity of the project. The point is that transvestitism, like faux orality, involves a more complicated presentation of beauty and "genre" and, depending on the situation, can ask the viewer to engage in very different styles of artistic appreciation. In other words, most modern readers have been intent on seeing these Mahāyāna sūtras as basically oral, honest, unmotivated works, whereas I have been interested in appreciating the work that went into producing that impression.

Though most readers may find the preceding arguments compelling in terms of narrative analysis, the full implications of the "medium is the message" might not be evident. On one level, the problem is straightforward enough: much of what is in these texts is about the texts themselves and their role in that triangle that mediates between the reader and "true" tradition. This self-justifying progression in the narratives is hard to miss once it is pointed out, but it leads to another level of interpretation that likely will elicit much less agreement, at least at first. Throughout these chapters I have been suggesting that the cardinal elements in our modern definitions of Mahāyāna Buddhism—emptiness, compassion, universal buddhahood, and expedient means—are either absent or, when present, appear to be "epiphenomena" or "slaves" of the textuality that presents them. Thus, as I argue below, these four doctrinal elements can be shown to be working pieces in each of these texts' attempts to reconstruct Buddhism around the text. Hence it is not that these authors had a pressing desire to explain emptiness, compassion, expedient means, and so on, in some new fuller form. Rather, they ended up relying on these items for the structural and symbolic roles they could play in seducing the reader into new reconstructed forms of Buddhism. Or put bluntly, the content of Mahāyāna Buddhism, at least at the outset, was largely shaped in response to the form

interrupt the function of the narrative, which is well established in the first half and not injured or impeded by the second half. In fact, it could be shown that the second author has read and understood the objectives of the first author and set about "improving" those objectives in accordance with rules and contracts that the first half had established.

that bore it. If textual seduction wasn't the game at hand, it is quite conceivable that altogether different elements would have been chosen to articulate a reconstruction of Buddhism. As I expect this position to be puzzling, let me treat each of the four topics in turn.

EMPTY AS A POCKET

First, the question of emptiness. As I have shown, the four texts treat ontology in four different ways, and thus on a basic level we cannot say that emptiness as a monolithic topic figures prominently in them. In the *Lotus Sūtra,* emptiness as a topic hardly appeared, and when it did, it came in the description of tired old monks stuck in the old form of tradition. Similarly, in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* emptiness is never mentioned. In the *Diamond Sūtra,* though the term was never used, something like an emptiness critique was used to break the reader's allegiance to old forms of tradition and push him or her to embrace the text as the final form of tradition and salvation. Thus, in the *Diamond Sūtra,* the negation of various aspects of tradition seemed designed to pass the reader through a brief moment of nihility and uncertainty, only to find himself or herself further enthralled by the text's "voice," which claimed the right to these maneuvers and, more important, primed him or her to accept that "voice's" command to recognize the text as the be-all and end-all of tradition.

As I argued in chapter 4, negation was applied in very selective ways in the *Diamond Sūtra,* and always with an eye to the text's end-game of reconstituting tradition around itself. There was, in short, no way to separate the text's steady attempt to elicit desire for itself and its equally steady attempt to undermine the reader's confidence in traditional statements about Buddhist law and value by, rhetorically, pulling them in and out of being. Consequently, the negation of being and presence, as a prior element of standard Buddhist discourse, appears to have been extracted from traditional discourse and turned on traditional items, such as Buddhist achievements or the transmission between Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni, to create a meta-perspective that consumed tradition according to its own laws. Similarly, just this format of passing Buddhism through a Buddhist critique seemed to dominate the middle chapters of the *Vimalakīrti,* as it developed a rather sophisticated and extended narrative based on explicitly annulling old-style Buddhism while enticing the reader with the play of two fully different forms of Buddhism—perfect and degraded—that were gradually wrapped around each other in a wonderfully arranged conversion sequence. In short, each text worked up a different ontology and used emptiness or negation in ways peculiar to its own narrative strategies.

Key to reading the rhetoric of emptiness as a narrative tool is noting that emptiness, or more exactly, negation and overcoming, no longer appear as

directed toward standard objects of investigation like carts, motion, and women's bodies but rather toward the Buddha, Buddhist practices, the transmission of buddhahood, the Buddhist hierarchy of saints, and so on. Thus emptiness-rhetoric was turned into a formula for moving the reader through a ritual-like procedure that broke his or her connection to the old form of Buddhism and led him or her to accept the text as the new form. Put otherwise, there are good reasons for thinking that emptiness in some early Mahāyāna sūtras has much more to do with what I termed "learning to be Buddhist about being Buddhist" and much less to do with ontology in a direct, nonpolemical manner.

In noting the role of emptiness-discourse in narratives of overcoming, we have to consider the possibility that this sequence of dissolution and reconstitution has everything to do with the structure and organization of patriarchy, and thus that Buddhist authors have realized that a piece of tradition—a thoroughgoing denial of being—could be put to use in reconstructing tradition. To pick up this problem in light of the theoretical topics that shaped chapter 1 of this book, let me consider the basic function of negation in any patriarchal claim: fathers have to deny the contribution of the mother and any other being in order to claim the full ownership of the son. Thus there is a close parallelism between the standard patriarchal mode of establishing identity via negation and the way that emptiness is actually applied in these narratives. Hence it is not simply that emptiness is relied on to devastate old forms of the law, but rather these authors applied emptiness for the basic task of cutting readers away from prior forms of identification and pushing them to accept the text as father precisely for its ability to redefine identity in this manner. Thus the devastation that is wrought on tradition and transmission in the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti* is part and parcel with generating the text as the font of tradition and preparing for the reader's induction into this new form of Buddhist identity. Consequently, as the dust settles from the assault, both texts directly offer themselves as the place of regeneration and connection to the highest form of truth and legitimacy. In sum, to ignore the close connections between emptiness-rhetoric, negation, paternity, and the narrative ritualization of conversion to a "higher" form of Buddhism is to read without noticing what one is reading.

Considering these sūtras as ritual-like sequences that rely on emptiness and negation to effect their agendas also sits well with an appraisal of the narratives' treatment of their textual presence. Thus, just as the narratives extracted emptiness from tradition as a tool to work on tradition, so, too, do these narratives excise themselves from their textual matrixes in order to work on precisely those physical texts. Hence all four texts move from ratifying their "speaking voices" to having those "speaking voices" present the textual vehicle that they inhabit as imminently available to transmit their

deepest essences. As I have argued, there is a rich alchemy at work in these narratives: orality is extracted from orthography and literature, and yet once established in the zone of the pure orality of the truth-father, it commands the reader to return to the physicality of literature as sublime Thing. Emptiness moves in the same way: it is extracted from tradition, turned on tradition, and then pushed aside so that tradition can stand again. In a fascinating way, emptiness and orality parallel each other in the narratives' evolution as they are temporarily needed in the middle zone as the text moves from being an illegitimate writing project to being textual tradition, the perfection of truth and being.

Much more could be said about the narrative role that emptiness plays and the parallels that are evident between it and the manipulation of authority, orality, and orthography, but to keep this brief, I will focus on one set of issues. The entire enterprise of writing the Buddha's orality involved a thoroughgoing erasure of the origins of that writing. As I argued in chapter 2 with the example of the seal, the text's agenda was only achievable by cutting it completely away from its productive matrix. Thus the voice of the text had to emerge immaculately from its orthographic presence on the palm leaf, and the orthography in turn had to appear cut off from the author, who himself had to completely evaporate and leave no trace of belonging to a complex writing culture that clearly paid attention to techniques for making this kind of reconfiguration of tradition workable. In short, the textual re-presentation of tradition involved a disavowal of causality and constructedness that are usually at the center of emptiness discussions, especially as they took form in the scholastic, nonsūtra genre of the likes of Nāgārjuna and then Candrakīrti. The point here is that in terms of their own production, the sūtras represent rather exquisite forms of reification, and this is diametrically opposed to what modern readers, and at least some traditional readers, took emptiness to mean. Thus whatever emptiness discussions do take form in texts such as the *Vimalakīrti* they are only present and potent through relying on several layers of reification that prohibit a straightforward reading of emptiness as it appears in that literary format.

In addition to catching sight of this contradiction between the complex literary construction of the voice that speaks of emptiness and the fundamental qualities expected of emptiness as an ontological critique, there is the larger problem of emptiness and authority, or rather, emptiness and patriarchal authority. As the authors of both the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti* seemed to recognize, emptiness can be turned on moments of transmission of authority with devastating effects. Thus, as in chapter 4 of the *Vimalakīrti,* the author had Vimalakīrti set out to prove to Maitreya that he had no reason to expect that he was to be the next buddha, since time, order, and movement were fundamentally impossible from the point of view

of emptiness. Of course, this did not prevent the author from rejoining Maitreya to the buddha-lineage by the end of the narrative, but it was only through accepting the *Vimalakīrti* text that that resuturing was effected. One might simply assume that the need for keeping authority ultimately intact propelled the author toward creating closure where he had just allowed the figure of Vimalakīrti to tear a hole. However, given that the *Diamond Sūtra* also works over the similar terrain of assimilating lack and discontinuity at the heart of buddha-transmission—"when the Tathāgata was where the Buddha Dīpaṃkara was, as for dharma, there was nothing that he *actually (shi)* obtained"—I suggest that we consider a more interesting explanation.

The narratives in both the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti* apply negation to standard Buddhist figures, elements, concepts, and so on, but they also, in their own ways, attempt to build on emptiness. Hence emptiness or lack, in all cases, is domesticated and then turned into a quasi-substantial thing that can be relied on to effect transmission and the proliferation of Mahāyāna discourse. In either case the clear implication is that even if emptiness can be wielded as an ax against any and every element of tradition, it can, with a little finagling, be turned into the basis of patriarchal transmission. In the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti,* patriarchy stands but only by getting the reader to accept that the content that holds patriarchy together is no more than the discourse explaining that there is no content, couched in the faith that this is enough to keep patriarchs together. Here a useful confusion is effected: the discourse of lack is taken to be both absence and presence. Because the discourse is explicitly about lack, the quality of lack is assumed to inhere in the discourse, and yet that very lack provides the discourse with a distinctive quality, and a visible and stable perimeter or boundary for that discourse, which is the opposite of the emptiness that it is supposedly conveying. Arguably, then, these authors have figured out that the language of lack is particularly suited to a regenerated form of patriarchy because it negates prior forms of patriarchy and authenticity, and yet as language per se can be relied on to hold patriarchs together. That is, since negation always comes in language, these authors have wielded negation as a perfect battle-ax: its business end can clean house on any prior claim to patriarchy, while its shaft remains present, innocuous, and solid enough to be the monolith of patriarchy.

Reading the rhetoric of negation in this manner suggests that it completely parallels the overall strategy for using texts to create orality and paternity: as they function, both text and emptiness perform in a way that would seem to destroy themselves—their basis of action includes their own refutation—and yet their forms and carriages remain to support the re-creation of what they just destroyed. Thus the Buddha in the *Vimalakīrti* champions Vimalakīrti's discourses on emptiness, which included Maitreya's dismissal as crown prince, and then goes on to claim that it is only this very

Vimalakīrti text, which holds these discourses on emptiness, that should be passed between himself and Maitreya. Given that Vimalakīrti had just "proven" that emptiness prohibits Maitreya from considering himself the Buddha's primary descendant, we have a fine example of a discourse of lack turning into presence, first as a particular form of discourse with a name and well-defined perimeter and then as the substantial Something that will carry the essence of the patriline of truth-fathers forward in time.

Lurking here, I would suggest, is the realization that patriarchs of truth do not need content; they simply need to have form, and, of course, a replicable format for creating desire for that form. Or, and it comes to the same thing, the only content that content needs to produce is a form or carriage for itself, especially one that can move it forward in time as a desired Something. Naturally, in view of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s extravagant finesse in arranging just this sort of maneuver, we should not be shocked by this possibility. In line with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s play of content and form, the cleverness of both the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti* is to allow emptiness and negation to "eat" the prior form of patriarchy long enough to accomplish two things. First, a lack of specificity is found in the traditional form of the lineage in order to effect the universalization of Buddhist sonship, so that the reader can be offered his own legitimacy and reissued Buddhist sonship, with the added boon that this regiving of authenticity will serve well to keep his attention for the remainder of the spectacle. Second, lack is then put back into the lineage so that it can be claimed that the lineage is ironically invincible to the very ontological assault that the text has effected. In other words, in both texts a form of Buddhist authority was constructed that bumped down the clearly defined lineage of buddhas by claiming it was the very knowledge that such a lineage was impossible that warranted the form of the lineage. Knowledge of lack of content, then, was reconstructed as the only content needed to hold the lineage together. This might seem like sophistry, but I think that given the sophisticated way all these texts play with identity, sonship, and paternity via language, we ought to set our sights high in evaluating the strategies at work here.

Moreover, if the *Vimalakīrti* is working from material that appears in the *Lotus Sūtra,* we have reason to suspect that that author, like the author of the *Lotus Sūtra,* would have come to some rather refined notions of lineage reconstruction. In particular, if the play of presence and absence of sonship can be so adroitly handled in these texts, so, too, can the play of paternal presence and absence, and not simply in terms of the forging authors' creation of the authorial "voice." More exactly, I suspect that turning emptiness critiques on patriarchal forms of authority was recognized as an ultimately safe tactic, as it was understood that patriarchal authority could still be constructed without content. As I have shown, the father can be defined as the one who knows lack and yet can still be taken as the one who gives identity,

a privilege that in these texts appears as a kind of imperial right won in the movement from not-knowing lack to recognizing it.

Thus, as in all these sūtras, one is moved through a sequence in which one loses identity to the father and then gains a "higher" identity, an "advancement" predicated simply on that initial loss of identity and the recognition of the father who performs the procedure and sanctifies it, based on his place in a "lineage of lack" into which the reader has now been inducted. Given the regularity of this process, perhaps we even ought to speculate that in this cycle of ever-deeper cuts into content in patriarchy, Mahāyāna authors began to figure out that the father with the least ontology wins at the game of paternal metastasis, a position that works well to explain the evolution of Chan rhetoric. However we theorize these evolving strategies for overcoming authority in and with Buddhist writing and rhetorics of lack, I think we should not lose sight of my introductory comments that patriarchal claims to identity are based on confusing the reception of the discourse on patriarchy with the assumption that some substantial content must be providing the basis of this discourse as it bumps down through the generations.

COMPASSION FOR THE MASSES AND EVERY MAN A BUDDHA

The topics of compassion and universal buddhahood, though slightly different in focus, can also be treated as fundamentally present in Mahāyāna rhetoric due to the pressures of textuality. Once we are aware of the texts' deep need for the reader's devotion, and the even more acute need for the reader's ratification of the voice of the text, the emphasis on compassion and universal buddhahood seems completely involved in structuring the reader's reaction to the text. In the case of compassion, we have a carrot-and-stick situation. All four texts aggressively attack tradition and all those readers who might side with tradition, and yet this aggression comes cloaked in the guise of a compassionate gesture offered by the Buddha who, in most cases, is shown finally giving teachings that he had previously withheld. Thus all four texts, though they lock themselves into gift exchanges with the reader, generate that reciprocal relationship under the banner of the first gift from the Buddha who, through compassion, gives what had not been given before. Thus, as usual, the Buddha is made to perform in the text in a manner that demonstrates the text's definition of real buddhas and real Buddhists—he is, now, finally being compassionate and giving the teachings that he had withheld for so long. In this manner, the Buddha's compassion for the reader, in place of the author's desire or fear of the reader, is held as the foundation for the teaching and the set of exchanges that the text seeks to establish with the reader.

The more interesting layers of compassion appear when the text tries to

turn the reader into a purveyor of the text. On this level, the reader is offered the chance to repeat the Buddha's fundamental gesture of giving the text by duplicating the text and handing it on. Here, compassion is designed primarily to stimulate the circulation of the text, and we would do well to consider whether the emphasis on the bodhisattva's universal compassion isn't intimately connected with the text's need to be circulated. After all, in all four sūtras, bodhisattvas are those who convert to textual forms of Buddhism, and thus their conversion, identity, and future relationship with the Other are bound up in their roles as readers and proselytizers of textual forms of Buddhism. The equation connecting compassion, the reader, and the future had, of course, been spelled out: one needs to save all beings, and the only way to save them is to give them this text. Consequently, with the text presenting itself as the only avenue to salvation and value, the narratives spend no time developing other modes of being compassionate. And, on the other hand, compassion completely dries up when it is a question of doubting the narrative or text. For example, in the third chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the narrative turned dark and nasty, just as it did earlier when describing the five thousand arrogant monks who rejected the teaching and left the Buddha's presence.

As a narrative element, then, compassion serves three ends. First, it initiates and purifies the cycle of gift exchange with the reader by making the text's first engagement with the reader appear as an unmotivated gift, stemming from compassion, that supposedly was not presented with a return gift in view. Of course, the text then would go on to explain, and assume, a set of gifts that the reader was expected to provide in exchange, but this very reciprocity was induced in response to the first gift that appeared to come from compassion and not calculation.

Second, compassion was designed to encourage the circulation of the text. Compassion becomes the motivating force for the text's life in community, virtual or otherwise, since readers learn that their reading tasks include resolving to pass on the reading of the text. Compassion, then, needs to flow with the text and structure the reader's intersubjectivity since that intersubjectivity is the very medium through which the text will flow. While the author's intersubjectivity is focused on manipulating the reader's intersubjectivity, his goal is only fully realized when he wins the reader's confidence and commitment to manipulate other potential readers' intersubjectivity. Thus, though author and reader find themselves committed to shaping future readers' relationship to the Real, via the consumption and reproduction of the text, the author never shares his deeper secret of creating that image of the Real and the medium of the text that it rides in, not to mention the wider set of laws that govern these exchanges.

Third, compassion in these four texts is wrapped up in the bid to universalize buddhahood, or at least the desire for buddhahood. Buddhahood

is offered to all, at discount rates, with the text set up as the avenue for bringing readers into their final subjectivity of buddhahood. With just a momentary flash of faith in the narrative, and then some commitment to duplicating it, all four texts offer a destiny that only concludes when the reader becomes identical to the Buddha-father tendering the promise. In this role, compassion acts as the binding, and blinding, love that holds the textual buddha to the reader, who comes to understand that the text is the entrance to his own being, a being that is none other than the being of the father. That is to say, compassion here is deployed to invite the reader to find a buddha within himself just as he has found a buddha within the text. So, as the text relies on various techniques for bringing the reader's gaze into the presentation of the Real within the narrative space, the reader is also invited, compassionately, to consider that he could perform a similar entry into his own immanent, yet hidden, buddhahood. Whether it is spoken of as recovered sonship, as in the *Lotus Sūtra,* or an "internal buddha," as in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* this form of compassion is constructed in the texts to forge a certain kind of self-appropriation that latches on to the text as the vehicle for self-actualization. Thus with content and function collapsing as one—take up the explanation of your final being as the very method for achieving your final being—compassion is the lubricant to make that process occur more smoothly.

In sum, it can be fairly concluded that in all four texts compassion is rarely if ever spoken of apart from these three forms. Thus compassion appears as a crucial tool in establishing the text in the reader's world and then encouraging the reader to continue the process for others. Compassion does not appear in its more universalized form of simple concern for the Other, free of the calculated exchanges of texts and forms of authority. Consequently, one of the key questions coming out of these arguments is to determine if and when compassion as a textual prop turned into a wider ethic set free of its textually determined birth.

There is, arguably, yet one more form of compassion that is integral to these texts. Compassion, joy, the nostalgia of father-son reunions, and the pleasure of rejoining a lost lineage all appear as aids to keep the reader reading. In works so aware of themselves as lofting along solely on the breath of the reader's internal or external iteration, any form of content that might discourage the reader or hinder his relationship to the text has to be avoided. Compassion as content, then, is but the flip side of writing-to-be-read. Of course, developing compassion cum seduction-of-the-reader did not mean that pleasure and consummation might not be postponed. Surely all four texts play in different ways at sustaining the reader's desire by various forms of charity, seduction, and compassionate treatment, but these postponements appear as but more sophisticated ways to seal and extend the love between reader and text. In short, if literary texts were crucial to

early Mahāyāna Buddhism, then compassion, promiscuous patriarchy, and a kind of universal buddhahood all had to be prominent components in both the texts and in Mahāyāna Buddhist rhetoric in general.

The question of universal buddhahood clearly is wrapped up in the reader's seduction, and yet it plays several interesting roles on its own terms. In the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* universal buddhahood served as the platform for speaking to all readers, who learn that they are already established within the zone of the text's polemics. All readers learn that their final identity was already known and prepared for by the textual father, who regularly speaks to this pretextual reality. Obviously, like Soviet propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s that claimed that all workers had a piece of Lenin in their hearts, this "sociology" of shared identity, grouped around a singular father figure, works to structure the discourse as an always-already true and inescapable arrangement. The reader learns, in yet another way, that his relationship with the text, though so clearly set up as a contingent gift exchange, is predicated on the foundation of his already present buddhahood and in many cases his deep historical relationship to the text—a history that he never knew of, as in the case of Maitreya or Vajramati. The greatest gift given, then, is that the gift has already been given. Sonship has already been prepared and now simply needs to be collected by receiving the text as but an effect of that prior gift.

In another light, universal buddhahood played out in these texts as an alibi for destroying the patriarchal boundaries and strictures of tradition. In this role, universal buddhahood provided the backdrop for deposing Maitreya, who received such rough treatment at the hands of the Mahāyāna authors covered here. Universal buddhahood allowed the authors to break the narrowly defined lineage of tradition, be it between Dīpaṃkara and Śākyamuni, or between Śākyamuni and Maitreya, and offer the reader a place of pride equal to Śākyamuni's or Maitreya's. Assuming that universal buddhahood was already present before the text appeared made the text's attack seem innocent and motivated simply by compassion—simply a return to a prior truth that had been forgotten, and certainly not the construction of a clever and derivative form of authority and legitimacy. Thus, with all four texts putting themselves forward as the sole item that made buddhas and tradition, universal buddhahood functioned as the already prepared receptive nose ring on which to latch the text and its promise of buddhahood. In short, universal buddhahood works to ground the reader's reception of the text so that it appears as a noncontingent prearranged event whose legitimacy should never be doubted.

On still another level, universal buddhahood works well to take care of the problem of content and the equally troubling details of legitimacy. If all readers already have the totality of tradition within them, there is no reason to be anxious that transmission, via the text and its rhetoric, might not work.

After all, there is really no need for transmission because buddhahood is already established on either "side" of the text: in the text's "oral" voice and in the reader's deepest being. Hence in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,* concern with content falls away as the focus on finding a replica of the one who gives content takes over. In short, accepting the doctrine of universal buddhahood is a happy call to the end of hermeneutics: no content needs to be transmitted other than the authoritative statement that nothing needs to be transmitted because it has already been transmitted. Thus the discourse of universal buddhahood seems to mesh nicely with the role played by emptiness, since both work at cutting identity free of its former matrix and attaching it to the one that effected that cutting.

Arguably the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti* work similarly, though with a more obvious emphasis on negative rhetoric, since they offer universal buddhahood to all readers and yet provide practically no directions for being Buddhist. What remains in lieu of prescriptions for being authentically Buddhist is the promise that if the reader agrees to the execution of the old Law, the new Law will be born in all its splendor. Tradition, then, is to be re-created moment by moment through enjoying a kind of surplus in the recognition that the old form of the Law and tradition are not what they are said to be. Actually, this is but another version of the above statement that "no content needs to be transmitted other than the authoritative statement that nothing needs to be transmitted." In short, universal buddhahood is an enthralling remainder that pops up once the old form of closure is overcome: accept that the old Law was benighted and woefully curtailed, and you will receive the fullest form of the Law and, in fact, become the Law. As usual in the texts, the problem becomes the solution, as the very act of rising above the prior forms is defined as the technique for achieving all the old goals—wisdom, nirvana, and buddhahood. In sum, universal buddhahood performs or encourages a number of discourse developments that have to do with the texts' two main agendas: overcoming tradition and relocating it in the reader's relationship to the text.

UPĀYA, OR THE BUDDHA AS DECEIVING AUTHOR

The fourth major attribute regularly associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism is an emphasis on upāya, or expedient means. In the textbook version of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this is treated simply as the ways that buddhas and bodhisattvas work on the rest of us; they think up effective strategies for leading us into buddhahood, often without showing us what they are doing or how they are doing it until after the fact. In this straightforward reading, upāya is simply the function of compassion and has nothing to do with the writing of texts or overcoming tradition. Likewise, there is no attempt to

explore the implications of Mahāyāna texts that promote images of the Buddha who, even if not shown writing or handling texts, nonetheless is shown creating deceptive narratives to draw his audiences into authenticity and enlightenment. Obviously, my argument here, already broached at several junctures, is that the authors of these texts have created a vision of real Buddhism and the real Buddha that matches exactly what they themselves are doing: the Buddha appears in these texts as a clever author of sorts who promotes stories, analogies, metaphors, and so on, that he knows to be mere fabrications. Arguably, then, upāya at this early point in Mahāyāna rhetoric means literary seduction, and thus the Buddha is being scripted by the authors of Mahāyāna sūtras as not only the virtual author of Mahāyāna sūtras but also the validator of the process of seducing audiences with literary fabrications.

Read in this manner, the Mahāyāna authors have absolved themselves by writing into existence an image of the ultimate lawgiver whose fundamental message, at times, is that rewriting the law is what buddhas do, not just once but many times. Thus the Mahāyāna buddha takes form around the authors' anxiety over the very rewriting of the Buddhist tradition but in a double form. The image of the Buddha as fiction writer covers the authors' guilt and audacity in stealing the fire of tradition but in another way also aids in seducing the reader by showing him or her that being seduced is how you advance in the Mahāyāna version of the Buddhist cosmos, and the buddhas prepared it in just this manner. As we saw with Śāriputra's reception of the Burning House parable, or again with Vimalakīrti's explanations of the two narratives of good and bad Buddhism, coming to an awareness of the seduction process is the deepest kind of seduction that these narratives arrange: just as the Buddha is fulfilling his role as seducer, you as reader can fulfill yours by allowing yourself to be seduced. One is, in effect, fulfilling the Law, by renouncing the law and admitting that lawgivers fundamentally play with the Law and with those who are to receive it. *Thus, accept that the Law and seduction go hand in hand, and you will have fulfilled the law just as you have been properly seduced.*

That later Mahāyāna writers and believers might have redesigned upāya and compassion into dogmatic entities that no longer bear such a close connection to textual seduction doesn't change the import of these earlier configurations. In fact, I suspect that overlooking the reconstruction of these early elements by middle and late period Mahāyāna authors has been the problem all along. We accepted the more mature Mahāyāna version of the essence of the Mahāyāna tradition without noticing that it had the awkward task of overcoming its initial act of overcoming tradition. Certainly, the battles that first-century Mahāyāna authors faced were quite different from those in the sixth, seventh, or eighth century. Thus I suspect that there was a growing embarrassment over the content of these sūtras that led later

authors to rewrite and redeploy upāya, compassion, and emptiness to appear much less connected to textual strategies and these earlier battles with tradition that had so much to do with inserting textuality into the Buddhist world.

This set of conclusions can be summed up in two parts. Close readings of these sūtras show that there is plenty of evidence to assume that their content is about the form that purveys this content: the narratives are, obviously, about the narratives and their relationship to the reader who is holding their textual vehicles. Second, many if not all of the philosophic-looking topics such as emptiness, compassion, universal buddhahood, and upāya are present to explain and effect the overcoming of tradition, an act that is also completely linked to textuality. That is, textuality is the wedge driven into tradition that explains why tradition is found in its own interior and not in the old sites of tradition, and to effect that relocation, numerous elements of tradition were extracted from tradition and set to work at this altogether new project of making Buddhism available through reading. Thus emptiness was applied to tradition to negate and belittle traditional topics, figures, and practices; the lineages of authority were reconstructed to create the image of texts as their vehicles of pure content, thereby allowing the reader a place in the most elite ranks of Buddhists; buddhas were redesigned to look like wily authors; and the creation of a bodhisattva ideal was rendered in a form that had everything to do with the cult of the text, its expansion, and the resurrection of lost legitimacy won through renouncing the previous modes of closure and validation.

GETTING GOOD AT BAD FAITH

In chapter 2, I introduced the concept of the seal maker who carved the reverse of that which he wished to portray and never represented the stem of his seal, or the act of cutting in reverse, in the images that the seal printed. In offering that comparison, I was looking for a way to imagine the process of writing authority into existence when the very act of writing in the voice of authority broke the back of authority and did so knowingly. In this final piece of the argument, I want to consider more closely what it means that various seal makers looked at each other's work of stealing tradition and sought to steal just those potent "thieving" elements from their colleagues' work. In short, I want to ask if the Mahāyāna tradition of writing sūtras might not have taken form through the efforts of authors who "belonged" to the disavowed tradition of writers who learned from each other how to better steal tradition. Returning to the question of "honor among thieves" at the end of the previous chapter, what should we make of the way these authors wrote new sanctifying structures for Buddhist authenticity that broke open not only the sanctifying structures of the Buddhist tra-

dition but also the sanctifying structures of the Mahāyāna sūtras that they clearly worked from? Or, put humorously, shouldn't we assume that these authors went to the school of bad faith and learned enough to know that they should deny ever having gone?

Embarking on this kind of assessment of authorship in Mahāyāna sūtra writing simply means facing up to two facts that most modern scholars of Buddhism would accept: (1) the Mahāyāna sūtras considered here were written some four hundred to six hundred years after the death of the Buddha and without clear lines of transmission back to the Buddha; (2) many of these sūtras seem to borrow form and content from one another. That is, reading throughout a broad range of Mahāyāna sūtras shows that content in many of these works seems altogether derivative and represents a kind of budding literary movement. Thus the *Diamond Sūtra* looks like it was patched together from the first three chapters of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines,* just as the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*'s long conclusion seems to be a knockoff of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s introduction, and the *Vimalakīrti* appears to have incorporated many elements of the *Lotus Sūtra* as well. And, of course, the *Diamond Sūtra* is essentially saddled with a second version of itself, just as the *Lotus Sūtra* seems to have been turned into a container for a variety of related and unrelated chapters that were attached after the first ten chapters.

One could say that these authors were simply picking up free-floating narrative chunks and in good faith writing them down for their brethren, but a little reflection shows that this is the least likely explanation. And, going against the unspoken rule in the History of Religions that we do not directly accuse religious authors of bad faith, I believe that bad faith is the only way to understand the writing of these texts.[2] Worse, as I just suggested, this bad faith has the added liability that it is a studied bad faith. One could imagine a writer, after an enlightening vision, simply setting out to draw the reader into his vision by the only means he had at hand—a seductive and self-ratifying narrative. The authors of Mahāyāna sūtras, on the other hand, seem to be working not from their own experiences or visions but from a tradition of writing and reorganizing authority. That is, it is only by reading

2. For readers familiar with Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of bad faith, let me clarify that I mean bad faith in a slightly different sense. Sartre treated bad faith in the tradition, descending from Nietzsche, of knowingly deceiving yourself, that is, producing and consuming lies that one knows to be contrary to the truth. As the following discussion makes clear, while I mean something similar, I want to focus bad faith on the act of giving the image of truth to the Other, to be consumed unironically, when in fact one has an ironic view of both that image of truth and the act of giving it. For Sartre's discussion, see *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 86–116. For Nietzsche's discussion of bad conscience, see *On the Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967), esp. pp. 84–96.

and grappling with other texts arranged around similar undermining intentions that these authors finally penned their own various seductions.

This form of stealing the fire of tradition counts as doubly bad faith because the author comes to the art of fabrication from studying it in the Other. Thus these texts seem to be written by authors who belong to a literary world in which trickery, subterfuge, and deception were objectified and transacted in an altogether steady and committed manner. This leads to a very interesting image of a subterranean lineage that reproduced itself as certain readers consumed works that they recognized as fabrications and then found themselves drawn into writing yet another fabrication. In short, the moment of recognizing insincerity in the presentation of authority serves as the very conduit for transmitting the techniques for writing texts dedicated to winning sincerity.

To appreciate this vision of early Mahāyāna writers rather furiously reworking authority, the first thing to avoid is the supposition that this writing simply welled up from communities whose views were already in place. This explanation of writing-by-committee is regularly relied on to explain Mahāyāna sūtras (and the various Christian Gospels), but obviously it is flawed and for three reasons. First, there is no clear notion of community articulated in these sūtras, and certainly there is no attempt to ground the rhetoric in a place or specific body of people. Second, these texts are intent on converting readers *into* some kind of community—virtual or otherwise—and not representing the values of a community already in place. Third, and most damning of this perspective, a community that arranged for the writing of any of these texts would have thereby been immune to the very thing that made these texts work—their supposed origins in another era, or in other galaxies, when they were spoken by buddhas and not written at all. These texts could only have value for a community, however it is imagined, if the community did not know of the writing, and thus the text cannot be construed as the reflection of the community's growing faith but must always arise through the scrupulous deception of an author who forever hides his identity in the secretive writing process, even as he recognizes the handiwork of his compatriot counterfeiters and takes his place in the invisible lineage of lineage-writers.

I would like to close by offering three scenarios for imagining this kind of rewriting of authority. I am at present partial to the third but want to mention the other two as well. The first scenario is the least generous: we could simply imagine early Mahāyāna authors taking a certain pleasure in deceiving their readers and riding a sadistic pleasure born of manipulating the simple expectations of their readers. This construction of the author relies, all too heavily I believe, on a kind of resentment. The author's motivations are drawn simply from the pleasure of ruining tradition, as it had been constructed, and perverting it by winding it around the very act of bad

faith that ruined tradition. The obvious liability of this assessment is that it is hard to imagine that someone with such simple negative motivations would engage in writing such complicated and artful works. Similarly, the authors of these works seem well read in Buddhist literature, and that suggests a much longer standing commitment to tradition and a much more complicated set of motivations.

The second scenario imagines a much more sincere sort of author: this author was trained as a Buddhist, well read in Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras, and simply interested in working up this new form of tradition in order to enjoy, and share, all it had to offer. In this case, we can imagine a sort of competition emerging where, after the success of a Mahāyāna text, a reader might find himself drawn to penning another narrative in order to win similar gains and explore more poignant ways to find the totality of tradition in the present. His motivations would be complex since he knew that he was breaking the Law in order to write the Law, but he had a "legal" precedent in the form of the early Mahāyāna sūtras, and he recognized that there was in fact a tradition of rewriting the Law as need be. He might see, too, that his deviance was at least partially facilitated by a commitment to elements of tradition. In particular, by relying on the rhetoric of emptiness as the very tool to preserve aspects of tradition, an author could feel that his reessentialization of tradition was in fact deeply traditional.

The third scenario is much like the second but more satisfying because it reflects the content of these sūtras in a more direct manner. Here, we need simply to begin the thought-experiment by remembering that each of these texts is built on a kind of overcoming of the Law and of tradition. Thus if authors were, themselves, overcoming the Law in rewriting it, they were, in fact, also offering their readers a version of that very same experience of overcoming. While I do not wish to hold up this shared experience of overcoming as a kind of bond between deceiving author and credulous reader, it nonetheless leads to some rather workable hypotheses about what was involved in stealing the image of tradition.

At the center of each of the above readings is the insistence that the authors have designed a reading experience dedicated to getting the reader to deny one form of authority and find authority in the very statement that authority is not where it was supposed to be. Thus, if we think in terms of horizons of closure, these authors have first clearly stepped beyond the prior horizons of authority and are asking their readers to come with them. Two questions then arise: what pushed these authors from the confines of their prior horizons, and why would they want company in that space-beyond-tradition?

The answers to these questions might never be known, and surely we ought to imagine different scenarios for different authors. Yet, given the convergence in narrative goals in the texts, I think we have to hazard an

overarching explanation. For my part, as the title and structure of this book suggest, I suspect that narrative, truth, and patriarchy are at play here in a manner that needs to be kept at the forefront of our speculations. That is, even early forms of Buddhism seem to have been engaged in patriarchal configurations of truth, and articulated Buddhist identity within a sequence of patriarchal overcomings. If this is so, then I would be inclined to sum up the impetus for writing these early Mahāyāna sūtras as an attempt to re-create tradition with tradition, as I have argued, but this required a deft manipulation of sameness and difference whereby the content of tradition—a truth-father urging renunciation, an escape from being, and devotion to the truth-father—simply turned on itself to ostensibly find its origins in the very act of disavowing those origins. Though it seems to tear at tradition, the act of renouncing one truth-father for another presumably gave some readers a greater sense of being Buddhist than simply accepting the Buddhist tradition. In fact, given that the Buddha is not shown practicing Buddhism in this incarnation in his last life, readers might have felt a greater kinship with him as they rejected a base-level version of tradition. Thus, in the act of renouncing the traditional form of the Buddhist tradition, they gained a sense of replicating, more exactly, that founding father's gestures: one leaves one's prior identity, home, and horizon in order to loft above on a higher track of truth-fathers who have all along known of the ultimate value of just this gesture of renunciation.

Framed in this manner, the authors' motivations start looking rather warm if not downright benevolent. As they worked out narratives to allow and encourage others to be Buddhist about being Buddhist, they might have felt that as long as they managed to effect in the reader that rejuvenation through renunciation, all else was forgiven. And similarly, given that the ultimate value here is overcoming, there was no reason to look askance at an overcoming that was only effected by promising another form of paternal closure. After all, a convinced reader had already performed the founding gesture of truth and legitimacy, at least as defined by tradition and these reconstructions of it. With the value of this project in mind, however complex, the meanness that sometimes creeps into these texts is probably more a function of a fear that the project will collapse, especially when criticized by the representatives of normative tradition, that is, the so-called Hīnayānists.

In sum, I don't see how a straightforward attempt to find good faith in forging Mahāyāna literature will work. Instead, I am drawn to an explanation of the Mahāyāna tradition of writing sūtras that imagines authors as something like theater aficionados who attend each other's productions, watching carefully to see how they work and how they might be improved. Consequently, though I am not interested in judging the morality of their choices, I am interested in admiring their confidence as they so cavalierly

manipulated the Buddhist tradition and the truth-fathers that held tradition together. I choose to end with an appreciation for their audacity and wherewithal, not only for the implicit lightness of being that it implies, but also because it suggests that a significant portion of the ongoing development of the Buddhist tradition appears to have been brought about by authors who clearly had much more interesting and complicated relations vis-à-vis tradition than we have given them credit for.

To return to the passage from Borges at the opening of this chapter, perhaps we ought to see that these Mahāyāna authors understood very well that fathers and mirrors are abominations for their duplication and extension of the world, but at the same time they understood that the duplication and extension of *fathers* was a fine and fair response, once the rhetoric of fathers had taken hold.

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